

The Lord Reigns

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If you would please now take your Bibles and turn with me to the book of Esther chapter 1. If you're using one of the church Bibles you will find that on page 410. Esther chapter 1. Before we turn our attention to the reading of God's Word, let's join our hearts together as we pray. Let us all pray.

Our Father, we come to You this evening pleading with You that we may hear a voice behind us in our ears saying, 'This is the way; walk in it,' and that You would give to us grace to look to Christ our King and our Bridegroom. That we would delight in Him, knowing that we are citizens of a better kingdom than this world. So come, and by the power of Your Spirit, minister to us Your own life giving work. For we ask it in the name of Jesus, Amen.

As we turn our attention to the reading of the book of Esther, I want you to lookout for the places in Esther where God's name is mentioned. Esther chapter 1 - this is the inerrant Word of Almighty God:

Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?" Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people."

Amen, and we give praise and glory to God for this reading from His inspired Word. May He write its eternal truth on all of our hearts.

What do you do when it seems like God is not there? That is a quandary all of us will face sometimes. One can only imagine, for example, how sharp and sore that very dilemma must be to the people of Moore, Oklahoma tonight. What do you do when it seems like God is simply absent? How are we to make sense of things when our convictions about God and His goodness and His love for us are, or at least seem to be, contradicted by our life and our experience? When you seek to be faithful to Him and He seems nowhere to be found? We come

this evening to the first in a series of studies in the book of Esther and in large part this is a book that sets out to ask and answer those questions. Actually, the fact the Bible doesn't shrink from those questions is almost as helpful to us when we find ourselves wrestling with them as the answers the Bible provides. Our faith is not shaken simply by asking hard questions. Our faith is shaken by asking them while laboring under the mistaken impression that somehow the Word of God does not anticipate them, does not itself ask them, and cannot speak to them with real world honesty.

So the book of Esther is one of the places where the Bible helps us when we find ourselves asking, "Where is our God?" You may have noticed as we read over the opening chapter of Esther together a few moments ago the conspicuous absence of the name of God, of any mention of the supernatural, of prayer, or worship. In fact, if you scan throughout the whole of the book of Esther, you will see that that is true. God seems, at first reading and at first glance, to be entirely absent from the story, which is sometimes exactly how we feel in our circumstances, right? "Everything is going wrong. Where is He? Where is He? I trusted Him. I've served Him. I've poured myself out in His cause. Where is He?" And yet the big idea that Esther wants us to begin to see is that the presence of absence is not the same as the absence of presence. The presence of absence is not the same as the absence of presence. Just because God is not listed in the dramatis personae, along with Esther and Mordecai and Ahasuerus and Haman, we would miss the point, the message of the book altogether if we didn't realize however important those characters are, Almighty God Himself is in fact the principle actor in the whole drama. God does not appear in various contexts, "showing up," I believe the contemporary phrase is, here and there, playing bit parts like an extra in the play of our lives. The point Esther makes, rather, is that the life pattern of each of the human actors in the story here and in our own lives also are lived out in the larger context of God's ceaseless, sovereign activity. He is no "extra" in the drama of our lives, but we are all players in the drama of which He is the author and the director and the principle character.

And so as we turn now to the opening chapter of the book of Esther, we need to keep in mind that principle - the presence of absence is not the same as the absence of presence. God is not named in these chapters, but His hand is everywhere. God doesn't speak in these chapters, but the characteristic signs of the direction of providence are all over our text communicating as loudly as any prophetic article how we are to understand the events as they unfold in the book of Esther. So would you look at this opening chapter with me please? Notice how the scene opens, the curtain lifts - in the banqueting chamber of King Ahasuerus in Susa, which was one of four of the capital cities, as it were, of the Persian and Median Empire. Notice actually the whole book is bracketed by two feasts. It opens with a feast of one kind and the book closes in chapters 9 and 10 with a feast of an entirely different character. Part of the agenda of the author of the book of Esther is to move us from one kind of feast held for one set of

reasons to another kind entirely; from the counterfeit to the real. From the empty to the substantial. From the fading joys of the worldling to the solid joys and lasting treasure that none but Zion's children know.

THE SATIRE: HOW THE KING DISPLAYS HIS OWN GLORY

In this case, the author of the book leaves us actually in no doubt about the kind of feast in which we are dealing in the opening scenes of the book. The whole thing is very carefully staged and orchestrated by King Ahasuerus to display his own glory and the author of the book goes out of his way to drive home that point to us. First of all we learn, don't we, about the virtually limitless power of this man. Verses 1 to 3 - he rules a vast empire; we're told from India to Ethiopia; 127 provinces. He is the supreme ruler of the world superpower of the day.

Secondly, we learn about the vast possessions of this man. Verses 4 to 8 - he shows his lieutenants, the princes and nobles, the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. You can't help but detect at least a hint of the perspective of the author there in the language that he is using. There's just a slight suggestion of a smirk on his face as he tells us about the grandeur of this king. That's important; it's going to reappear - that note of satire again and again in the book of Esther.

And when the feast is over, for the army and the nobles, there's another feast, in the garden this time, for the common citizenry of the city of Susa. It lasts a week.

And look at verse 6 - the Hebrew is unusual there. One commentator tries to capture something of the sense of it by translating verse 6: "And oh the white cotton curtains and violet hangings and oh the couches of gold and silver and the mosaic pavement of porphyry and marble and mother-of-pearl! Oh the grandeur, oh the glory, oh the opulence!" This is a place designed to stun, to take your breath away, to leave you gawking and speechless as you walk in, and in absolutely no doubt about the personal power and glory and wealth of the man whose residence this was. Verses 7 and 8 tell us the wine is flowing freely. You can imagine the kind of party it rapidly became. In verse 8, Ahasuerus declares the drinking rule - "There is no compulsion." Now there's another irony, right?

As one writer remarks, "In an autocracy, the absence of a rule requires a decree." It's actually hard not to smirk again at the micromanaging, megalomania of the king that needs to legislate for how people drink at his party, which, by the way, is exactly what the author is aiming at. Ahasuerus wants us to bow before him in awe and reverence. He wants to be adored by his subjects, feared by his enemies, obeyed by everyone. He wants total control.

THE IRONY: HOW EMPTY AND LIMITED THE KING'S POWER REALLY IS

But as the next scene unfolds, it's as though our author were puncturing Ahasuerus' bubble rather ruthlessly. He is unflinching in exposing how empty

and truly limited the king's power really is. As the party reaches its climax and Ahasuerus is full of wine, he summons his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti. He sends seven eunuchs to collect her. She is to come wearing her royal crown and all in order, verse 11, "to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at." Now you see how the king's used his wife. He is not devoted to her, loving her, giving himself up for her - Ephesians 5:25-28 - not Ahasuerus. To him, Vashti is another possession, perhaps the crowning possession among all his other treasures. She is literally a trophy wife and he wants to show her off, but only to make himself look good. Ahasuerus has everything, doesn't he? Near total power, he thinks, unending riches, and a wife whose beauty is the crowning monument to his own towering ego. She is his tool, his play thing, and he wants to show her off before the leering stares of his generals.

But Vashti won't come. We don't know why. A great deal of ink has been spilled trying to supply motives for Vashti's refusal. Was she a proto-feminist? Was she more noble than the king? Is she the real heroine of the story? It's all entirely beside the point. The author is not in the least interested in giving us those details because Vashti isn't the focus. The point rather is that suddenly and very publically indeed, Ahasuerus' power and might and influence and prestige and resources and money are all revealed and exposed for the empty things they really are. With one lash of his pen, the author of the book of Esther paints Ahasuerus for a fool. He is a man who has given himself to the pursuit of glory, outward glory, earthly glory, but the most basic realities of life elude him. His marriage is a sham. His power isn't anywhere near total after all. His sovereignty is not absolute. His wife shrugs off a command from the most powerful man in all the world and everyone sees it.

And now look at verse 12. Ahasuerus, the god-king, ruler of 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia is overcome with a temper-tantrum. "He that had rule over 127 provinces," says Matthew Henry, "had no rule over his own spirit." He was enraged. He who controlled the drinking habits of his subjects by royal decree could not so much as control his own temper. He summons his wise men. They decide in verses 13 to 22 that Vashti's got to go. "What a terrible example she's setting to the noble women and the wives of the empire! Before we know it, all the women will be talking like this to their husbands!" That's what they say. So she's never again allowed into the king's presence. And more than that, verse 22, it now becomes a universal law that "every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his own people." So now all the power of the empire, the vast resources of the empire, with its huge bureaucracy, is going to line up behind a royal command given in a moment of drunken anger, mandating that men should be masters in their own homes. Do you see how laughable that is?

If we were to uncover the original manuscripts of the book of Esther I think there would be a number of places where the writings are kind of shaky; where the

author was laughing so hard at the absurdity of human power flexing its muscles and posturing at problems it has no power to fix. Ahasuerus is tilting at windmills. He's trying to command the tide to turn. He's making laws that could never be enforced so that each line of this decree, written in a fit of pique, rather than underscoring his greatness - which is what he wants - actually serves only to unmask the vanity and the impotence and the insecurity of this man and his values.

I. THE DANGER OF BEING ENTICED BY THE TRAPPINGS OF EARTHLY GLORY

And that brings us to the first thing that I want to make sure that we all learn here from this story. In Esther chapter 1 we are being invited to view the world and its values from a new perspective. The book of Esther wants us to stop being so easily dazzled by the trappings of earthly glory, by wealth and prestige and power. In fact, Esther wants us to recognize that not only is a life lived in pursuit of such things empty and foolish, it is ultimately absurd. It is laughable in eternal perspective. You're supposed to laugh at Ahasuerus but only as a way to teach us to laugh at ourselves and all the temptations of a world that fixates on what you have and what you wear and what you do and who you know and where you went to school. The author of Esther is laughing at the ridiculous spectacle of pompous Ahasuerus who doesn't realize that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things. And he does so in the hope that that same realization will begin to dawn on all of us with him.

"But if Ahasuerus appears ridiculous, how much more ridiculous are we," asks Iain Duguid, "when we spend so much time and energy," you fill in the blank, he says, "a new sports car, a great pair of shoes at the mall, the latest home improvement in the mail order catalogue? Ultimately it's all empty. The emperor's costly clothes are transparent and what may be seen through them by the discerning eye is ridiculous. True value lies in an altogether different empire."

Esther wants us to view the world and its values, the things that it prizes and what it runs after and longs for with different eyes and to see them for the empty and futile pursuits they really are.

II. WE ARE TO VIEW GOD'S PROVIDENCE WITH RENEWED PATIENCE

And secondly, in this opening chapter of Esther, we are being taught to view God's providence with renewed patience. When you start to read Esther for the first time and you get to the end of chapter 1, you're rather scratching your head wondering, "What in the world is going on? How do I make sense of this? God isn't mentioned and there aren't even any of God's people in this opening chapter." We're being taught here, actually, a principle articulated by the puritan, John Flavel. He said, "Providence is like a Hebrew word - it is best read

backwards.” Providence is like a Hebrew word - it’s best read backwards.

Esther chapter 1 doesn’t really read like theology at all. It is an entirely secular setting, shows us pagan life lived out in the pursuit of earthly glory, oblivious to the Lord, unconcerned for His kingdom, His name isn’t mentioned, His purposes are unclear. But to rush from there to the conclusion that, that must therefore mean that God is not really involved, that all this unfolds away from His gaze, that would be a serious mistake. Just because we can’t see what God is doing or where He is to be found in our circumstances, just because we’re not in a position to discern His design of plot His course, that doesn’t mean that we should dismiss the presence and sovereignty of God out of hand.

In fact, as we’ll see in the weeks to come, the drunken parties at Susa, so distasteful, the refusal of Vashti to become the object of lecherous stares, the temper-tantrum of a spoiled king, even the sycophantic flattery of his royal advisors, each of them play a vital role in opening the door for a young, unknown Jewish peasant girl called, Esther, who will rise to the throne to become the instrument of God’s deliverance of His people. So don’t be so quick to dismiss the mundane, even the dark and the worldly details, as though God were not sovereign over them all. God is working even in the avarice and greed and lust and pride of Ahasuerus for the glory of His name and the salvation of His people.

Esther 1 wants to help us learn to take the long view, to wait, and to read the providence of God with hindsight, with the benefit of knowing at last what God was doing in those long, dark, sore, difficult days when you couldn’t see His hand or discern His design. Esther 1 is a lesson in trust. The Lord is asking us in it, “Will you rest in who you know I am - a good God, loving, gracious toward you, even in the darkest days when My purposes are obscure and unclear? Will you simply trust Me and know that I am working in all things, even in these dark trials, for the good of those who love Me and are called according to My purpose?”

III. A DIFFERENT KINGDOM AND A BETTER KING

And then finally, Esther 1 is intended to make us long for a different kingdom and a better king. Here is earthly power at its pinnacle, right? Here’s the highest a person can rise in this world’s estimation. Here’s glory and influence and pleasure and success. But as we read it, it leaves us with a bitter taste in our mouths. It leaves us uneasy and discontent and struck again by the absurdity of a life that is lived in pursuit of those things. It leaves us longing for a better kingdom and a better King, one whose rule is just rather than capricious, one who’s invitations to us are marked by love, not by lust or a will to power, who does not view His bride as an instrument for self-aggrandizement, but who gives Himself up for her indeed. It leaves us longing for Jesus. His kingdom is not marked by displays of external glory. He is frankly unimpressed with the trappings of earthly influence and prestige. He does not choose, Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians chapter 1, He does not choose many who are wise according to this world’s standard, nor many who are powerful, nor many who are of noble

birth. That's not what Christ's kingdom looks like. No, no. He chooses the foolish and the weak and the low and the despised in the world, even those that are naught, to bring to nothing those that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

Unlike Ahasuerus, Jesus is a King who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many. He is a King crowned with thorns to whom homage was paid but by mocking soldiers who crucified Him. A King who found His empire as nails are pounded through His flesh and He is hung on a cross at Calvary. Whose subjects are bound to Him not in servile fear but by strongest cords of love. Jesus is a better King and He calls us all to come to Him. You can sympathize with Vashti, right? Why on earth would she come at this man's beckoned call? But Jesus is a different King, a better King. He loves His people and His invitations to us are always invitations of grace and mercy and hope. He is a King in whose rule we can rest securely, a Husband in whose love we can trust completely, a Sovereign in whose power we can always flee to take refuge. Why refuse to come to Him when He calls? Will you pray with me?

Lord our God, we bow before You and we bless You that though all around us the world's lusting after empty glory is exposed by Your Word for its brokenness and futility, You are still gracious to us to provide a better King and a better kingdom. Oh would You draw us all afresh to Him, give us eyes to see Him and faith to rest upon Him, for we ask this in His name. Amen.

Would you stand and receive God's benediction?

And now may grace, mercy, and peace from Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

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