

The God Who is Absent

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- [0 : 0 0] Father God, we pray that you will reveal yourself, that your word will be impressed upon our minds and hearts, that we will understand more of your workings in this world.
- Amen. I guess most of us have had times when we feel far from God, when we feel that God has abandoned us or that God is absent.
- When our prayers don't seem to be answered. Times when we might be lacking in spiritual zeal or enthusiasm. Times when it's hard to detect God's working in the world.
- Hard to detect God's work in our lives. The book of Esther addresses that issue. It's a very odd book. Of all the 66 books in the Bible, it's the only one that does not mention the word God.
- Something odd in a book, the Bible, that is, about God. It's a book that's been disliked by Christians over the years. Martin Luther didn't like it because it was too Jewish and not Christian enough.
- [1 : 1 5] It's the only book that's not found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. But it's actually a book that Jews love, especially this century, because the trouble in the book of Esther, as we will realise, is that the Jews were under threat of extermination.
- And so for Jews this century, facing the Holocaust and experiencing it, the book of Esther is a very special book and is read each year in their feast called the Feast of Purim.
- Indeed, apparently in many circles, the Jews get people to act out the various parts. Somebody reads the part of the villain and somebody the part of the king and somebody the part of Esther. The Jews gathering together to celebrate the feast will boo and cheer at the appropriate times, booing the villain and cheering the heroes.
- The scene is Persia, 480 BC. Persia was the world empire of that time. In 539, about 60 years before, the Persians had defeated the Babylonians.
- The Persian empire extended in the time of this king. From Pakistan, what's now modern Pakistan, to the north of Sudan, quite an extensive empire, encompassing all of what is today Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, a part of Arabia, Israel, Egypt, Sudan, and so on.
- [2 : 4 5] In the time of this king, King Ahasuerus, he is confronting the Greeks and fighting against them, but not with very much success. The king's name is Ahasuerus, but in Greek, it's Xerxes.
- Ahasuerus is the Aramaic equivalent of that name. And he was king for 20 years. He was a bold and ambitious king. He was handsome and decadent and indulgent as well.
- The famous Greek historian Herodotus wrote in that century, so we actually know quite a bit about King Xerxes, and it ties in with the picture that we get of him in this book of Esther.
- One of the things that King Xerxes is known for in the ancient world is for building a pontoon bridge across what's called the Hellespont, a bit of what's in Turkey, but crossing Europe to Asia near Gallipoli, where the battle was fought in the First World War.

The bridge was blown apart by the wind and the storms. So he ordered his men to go and beat the water with broomsticks, telling it off for disputing his bridge.

[3 : 52] Yes, you see, this is a man to be reckoned with. This is a man of power. The book begins by telling us that. This happened in the days of Ahasuerus, the same Ahasuerus, who ruled over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia.

Well, ancient India is modern Pakistan, and ancient Ethiopia is modern North Sudan. Yes, this is a king to be reckoned with. And what sort of power he yielded.

He organized feasts. The book of Esther is full of feasts and fasts. He ordered two banquets in these opening verses of the book.

The first one for all the officials. The second one for all the people of the city of Susa, the capital city. It seems that he was a bit of a drunkard, this king Ahasuerus.

Verse 7 of chapter 1 says that drinks were served in golden goblets, goblets of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. Which means, it seems, that whenever the king drank, you could drink, and he drank often.

[4 : 58] A sozzled sovereign was King Ahasuerus. But this king, who yielded such great power over such a vast empire, was a bit of a fool.

Because he couldn't even control his wife, the queen. He had this feast, and he ordered Queen Vashti to come and appear before the feast to show off her beauty to all those who were gathered for the banquet.

Some suggest it means that she was to appear naked apart from the crown on her head. But maybe that's not just the case. Whatever the situation, Queen Vashti decides that she doesn't want to appear before him.

So in verse 12, she refused to come at the king's command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this, the king was enraged, and his anger burned within him.

This is hardly a man of great decision. It's hardly a man who took decisions for himself and showed much leadership. He didn't know what to do when the queen refused to come to him.

[6 : 02] So he gathered around all his officials to ask them, what do I do? And they decide to issue an edict that no wife is to rise up against her husband.

One gets the sense of inability to cope with one little situation because he issued an edict that went to every province, in every tongue, sent out by the royal mail, that is a horse would gallop for a number of hours and then in exchange for another horse to gallop a bit further into the kingdom.

This extraordinary length that he went to to issue this decree. And the decree was, in verses 21 and 22, this advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memakon proposed.

He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language declaring that every man should be master in his own house. It hardly needs that, does it, in the ancient world?

That shows what this king's like. He can't really control the situation. This is the powerful Xerxes and he has to send an edict out to tell men to be rulers of their own house.

[7 : 12] Some king. Well, Queen Vashti is deposed for her rebellion against the king and so the search begins for a replacement.

The guidelines are, she has to be beautiful. No other guidelines. It says something about the standards and priorities of King Ahasuerus. So chapter 2 is all about the search to find a beautiful queen and various ones.

Potential queens are brought into this harem and spend 12 months making themselves beautiful before they're paraded before the king.

And the king came to choose a woman called Esther. Esther was a Jew and she became the queen. She hadn't told anybody that she was a Jew which may have been a good thing.

It may not have mattered. Esther becomes the queen. And another banquet occurs just in case they haven't had enough. Verse 18, then the king gave a great banquet to all his officials and ministers.

[8 : 13] Esther's banquet. One more scene, the end of chapter 2, sets the scene for the book. Esther the Jew had a cousin Mordecai who was in fact her guardian who brought her up because she was an orphan.

Mordecai was the one that pushed her towards this competition to find the queen. Mordecai sat in the king's gate. Doesn't mean a little gate like we know it, but a gate in ancient times was the courtyard.

It was in the wall of the city. And in the wall, as you walked through the wall from the outside to the inside, there would be recesses in the gate where acts of jurisdiction and legal transaction were carried out.

And Mordecai, it seems, had some responsibility. So he sat in the gate. Indeed, these gates are huge. A gate in ancient Persia that's been excavated is something like 20 yards wide.

And that's where Mordecai was. And it happened that he overheard a plot by two of the king's eunuchs to kill him. And he reported that to his cousin Esther who reported it to the king. And the plot was foiled.

[9 : 19] The two people who proposed it were murdered, assassinated, hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the annals of the king that Mordecai had foiled this plot.

Mordecai is not rewarded for his plot, for foiling the plot, but it's recorded in the annals. Now, I should say, in case any are unsure, these eunuchs that are floating around the place is, of course, because the king would be frightened that any of his officials would have illicit relationships with the women of his harem, so they were eunuchs to prevent that from happening.

The stage is set for the drama of the book of Esther. And like any good story, all the threads that are there in the opening chapters get tied up as you go through the story.

So it's actually significant that Mordecai happens to overhear the plot, and it's significant that his name's recorded in the annals, and it's significant that Esther conceals her Jewishness, even though she's a queen, and it's significant about the law that deposes Vashti, and the law that goes out to the empire about the man being ruler over the house, and the importance of Persian law, and so on.

Just like any good story or any good TV program, all the threads will actually come together as the story unfolds. There's one more character yet to be introduced, and he comes at the beginning of chapter 3.

[10 : 43] After these things, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman, son of Hamadatha, the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the officials who were with him.

We don't know why he advanced him. Certainly in the light of the end of the preceding chapter about Mordecai's revealing the plot, one wonders initially why not Mordecai?

But anyway, Haman, for whatever reason, is made in effect the prime minister of the country. Mordecai does not bow down to him, pay him the honor that's due to him.

In some senses, that's a bit odd because even the Jews were allowed to bow before people and did in the Old Testament at different times. But for whatever reason, Mordecai chose not to. Maybe he was slighted by the king, maybe he thought Haman was power hungry, which he was, or maybe he thought as a Jew he shouldn't bow down to him.

Haman doesn't like it. And so he decides not just to tell Mordecai off, not just even to punish him, not even just to kill him, but rather to kill all the Jews because of Mordecai's action in not bowing down to Haman.

[11 : 55] It's a fairly disproportionate response to Haman's lack or refusal of bowing to Haman. It shows something of the power hungry, arrogant character of this prime minister called Haman.

Mordecai, you see, was a Jew and so Haman was going to kill them all. The Jews are those who are the people of God in the Old Testament. Strictly speaking, they're those who descended from the tribe of Judah, hence the name Jew.

Indeed, in the Old Testament, we don't really get the term Jew until the time after Judah fell and Jerusalem was destroyed in 587. That was 100 years before these events.

The Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and all the leaders of the Jews, all the tribe of Judah, were taken off into exile and planted around the place in places like Susa, which later became the Persian capital when the Persians defeated the Babylonians.

Well, the crisis deepens because Haman then goes to the king with his plan to kill all the Jews and he gives to the king all sorts of half-truths and lies.

[13 : 05] So, verse 8, Haman said to King Ahasuerus of chapter 3, I'm on, there is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom.

True. Their laws are different from those of every other people. True. And they do not keep the king's laws. Half-true. So that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them.

Untrue. Remember who it was who foiled the plot to assassinate the king? Mordecai the Jew. How can they say that the king could not tolerate Jews?

Haman is twisting the truth or distorting the truth or feeding propaganda to the king in order to get his way. But not only that, he goes on to make a bribe.

If it pleases the king, verse 9, let a decree be issued for their destruction and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charged the king's business.

[14 : 08] That is a huge bribe to King Ahasuerus. Some suggest that it's two-thirds of the national economy. Now maybe that really is not the case but it's an enormous amount.

The king, to his credit, in verse 11, says, no, keep the money in effect but carry out your plan to kill all the Jews. Haman, in concocting his scheme, rolls dice for guidance.

Verse 7, in the first month, which is the month of Nisan, that's the month when the Passover is celebrated, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast pur, which means the lot, that is rolling dice, basically, before Haman to decide the day and the month that he could conduct his plan.

That is, he's in a sense searching for the guidance to work out when he should kill all the Jews. He doesn't turn to the stars but he might as well have his rolling dice.

And the answer comes up the twelfth month, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which happens to be eleven months away. It's like rolling dice now to decide when you're going to do something and you find out you've got to do it next August, it now being September.

[15 : 24] It's almost folly the actual answer that he's given. Why wait eleven months? And yet, that's the answer that he's given. Haman heeds the dice.

Well the edict then is issued and we've already been told in chapter one that any law issued by the Persian authorities is irrevocable. It cannot be changed even by the king.

The laws of the Medes and Persians are indelible in a sense. They cannot be changed. And so we find that the writing is certainly on the wall for the Jews.

They are really in desperate straits because this law cannot be changed even though it's not going to be enforced for another eleven months. Well if you were a Jew how would you respond to that situation?

I'd have thought you'd pray. I'd have thought you'd pray to the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob who has already delivered his people in the past who has already saved them in various ways and I would pray to him for deliverance.

[16 : 32] But there is no mention of prayer. I'd have thought at least we would get a mention of God but there is no mention of God. Yes in chapter 4 verses 1 to 3 the people weep and lament and mourn wear sackcloth and ashes and fast and there is an allusion there to faith and trust in God but God is not mentioned.

There is no prayer to God. There is no mention of God. God is conspicuous by his absence. After this weeping and mourning Mordecai takes action and he sends a message to Esther to tell her to go to the king in verse 8 that Esther should go to the king and make supplication to him and entreat him for her people.

That is she would have to go to the king and say king I am a Jew and I entreat you on behalf of my people to somehow change the edict that has been issued.

Esther's response is that if I were to do that I would die. Verse 11 chapter 4 Esther Esther the queen the queen it seems is even out of favour.

She will be taking her life in her hands if she goes into the king to plead for her people. We have already seen what happened to Queen Vashti in chapter 1.

[18 : 36] She refused to come to the king when he ordered her and she was deposed and cut out. Now Esther is being asked to do the opposite but even more dangerous thing of going to the king when he doesn't ask for her and there the punishment is death.

Mordecai's response in verses 13 and 14 are the crunch verses of the whole book. Mordecai told them to reply to Esther Mordecai's response to Esther expresses confidence that deliverance will come.

It's a veiled allusion to God. Again there is no mention of God. God again is deliberately absent from the words of Mordecai but it's clear that the hand behind world events in Mordecai's view is God.

Not chance not rolling the dice not the stars not luck not fatalism but rather God and he expresses a confidence in God without mentioning his name.

But secondly such certainty of God's deliverance does not mean he's going to be passive. He doesn't say well God's going to deliver his people so let's just sit and wait. He doesn't say as so many Christians say let go and let God but rather if God is going to save his people if God is in control then act.

[20 : 23] God's control means we act we take responsibility we show initiative we don't sit back on our laurels because God is in control.

Esther must act says Mordecai. Thirdly he raises the possibility that God's hand has been already at work perhaps he says the end of verse 14 raising the possibility perhaps you have become queen for just this reason.

anybody else would have said that Esther became queen because she was the most beautiful. Anyone said Esther has become queen almost a random event nothing to do with God it's a secular beauty contest by a pagan king king but Mordecai is hinting at something much deeper that even behind the pagan king and behind the secular event lies the hidden hand of God perhaps Esther it's God who's made you queen just for this purpose but fourthly note that what Mordecai says is that if Esther doesn't act relief and deliverance will still come he doesn't say you have to act in order for God's purposes to be worked out but rather God is God and his purposes will be worked out even if you fail him he's not giving Esther the chance to opt out but rather saying if you fail Esther God's purposes will still be worked out now that's a grand statement of the sovereignty of

God because God is in charge even if we fail God's purposes are not dependent upon me if they were God would not be God God would only be as powerful as I am but God is more powerful and his purposes will be worked out even if we fail to play our part in them that's a great statement of the sovereign power of almighty God and it clearly contrasts with the power of king Ahasuerus who couldn't even control his wife and when she refused him he didn't even know what to do this verse is the turning point in the book from now on Mordecai obeys Esther not Esther obeying Mordecai from now on Haman's plans are thwarted from now on the

Jews will be saved and though God is never mentioned he is surely in control but why is it that God is not mentioned why not say the people prayed to God as they surely must have done why not mention the content of their prayer they would surely have prayed to the God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob why not mention that God will save us why say it in to identify with them but then to show them that indeed God is present even if his name is not mentioned it's to instill faith in these people that

[24 : 08] God works in the world by a hidden hand not necessarily by miracles and overt displays of power and God's word but that God's hand is guiding things in a hidden way and we are to have faith and eyes that see that there's a great subtlety in this book about the way in which God works so many things in this book look to be coincidences happen a former Archbishop of Canterbury William Temple said that when I pray coincidences happen and that's what happens in Esther is it just coincidence that Esther is a Jew who becomes queen no it's not is it a coincidence that she conceals her Jewishness well no it's not is it a coincidence that Mordecai happens to overhear some conversation about the assassination of the king no it's not is it a coincidence that in chapter 6 the king doesn't sleep one night no it's not is it a coincidence that he just happens to read the annals that just happened to talk about

Mordecai foiling the plot and he happens to wonder whether Mordecai has been rewarded or not no that's not a coincidence either is it a coincidence that Haman just happens to walk in at the time that he's thinking about how to reward Mordecai no it's not is it a coincidence that the king walks in just at the time when Haman flings himself on the queen and the king thinks that he's trying to rape her no it's not they're not coincidences the eyes without faith might say oh this is just a coincidence but the eyes of faith see the hand of God in a hidden way working in the world what some might think are coincidences Christians must surely recognize is the hand of a loving provident and powerful God in the end you see which worldview is right the worldview of Haman that rolls dice for guidance the fatalistic atheist who believes that power is in his hands and that there is no supreme authority but that everything is ordered by dice as well or is it the worldview of

Mordecai who reckons on the hidden hand of God the irony is that God is present just when we think he is most absent the irony is that God's presence is abundantly clear in the book of Esther even though his presence because God doesn't need miracles or flashy shows of power to show his presence but he works in hidden everyday events in this world real power lies with God not the sozzled sovereign and not the power hungry prime minister but with God as the writer to the proverbs of the proverbs said many are the plans in a person's heart but it is the Lord's purpose which will prevail there is no wisdom no insight no plan which can succeed against the

Lord let's pray our great God we indeed acknowledge you as our sovereign Lord over all things we pray that when we feel far from you that you will remind us of your enduring presence with us we pray that you will remind us that you are never absent from us or from this world and we pray that you will give us eyes to see you and ears to hear you in the hidden ways in which you work in this world to bring about your purposes Amen