

# Is God Absent?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, can we look at Esther chapter 1 again?! We're going to look at the whole chapter, but probably the key verse is 19.

! 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a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and Medes, so that it may not be repealed that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus.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 he. The TV program I really enjoy is Who Do You Think You Are?

It takes a famous person and it looks at their history, where they come from, who their people are, who their people were. It's absolutely fascinating, as I'm sure many of you are fascinated by your genealogy.

Who are your people? Where did they live? And what did they do? And many of these stories, of course, elicit times of tears. You see the celebrities, they weep because of perhaps hardship of their ancestors.

[ 1 : 18 ] Some of the ancestors were sold into slavery. Others of them went through terrible deprivations in the war. And folk are traumatized by the history of their own family, their own people.

This is such a book. The book of Esther is our story, you know. It's the story of the Church of God. It's at least partly the story of the Church of God.

The Jewish people in the Old Testament are our people. And when we read of the Jewish people, we read of the Church of God, which, of course, is the great...

The Church of God is the fulfillment of the promise given to Abraham and to the Jewish people.

Now, again, who am I speaking to tonight?

There's, I'm sure, a great variety of folk here. There are those of you who know Esther off by heart. You know Esther better than I do. That it's the story of a Jewish girl who saved the Jewish people from annihilation.

[ 2 : 21 ] It's the story of a beautiful young girl who became a queen, a queen of Persia, and who was raised, of course, the most famous passage or verse in Esther is, who was raised for such a time as this story, which is indeed intriguing and compelling.

There's others of you, and you've never even heard of the book of Esther. And maybe this evening is the very first time that you've opened this particular book of the Bible.

Well, I hope that one of the side products of this evening will be that this evening you will go back home and you will read the book of Esther for yourself because it really is a page-turner.

It's certainly not Mills and Boone material. It's much deeper than that as it tells the story of God's dealing with the church of God. So why have I picked the book of Esther this evening?

Well, I was speaking somewhere else the last few weeks on it, and so it was kind of in my mind, and I've been living with this book for the last four or five weeks.

[ 3 : 35 ] I picked it probably for three main reasons. Number one, of course, it's in the Bible. All Scripture is profitable for us and to us. Every single book of the Bible is there for us, and the Bible is the most intriguing, most interesting book in the whole of the world.

The book of Esther is one of those books you really have to work at because the meaning of it doesn't instantly come. But as I said this morning, Esther, the Bible is written for all of us.

The Bible is not written for expert theologians. It's written for ordinary people like us. So it's in the Bible that's the first reason. The second reason is that I'm rather intrigued because, of course, you all know it's one of only two books in the Bible named after women.

Someone said that the Bible is written from a man's perspective, and they say it's a very masculine book. It is written certainly from a man's point of view.

Well, whether there is a man's point of view or a lady's point of view is a subject which I certainly will not even begin to tackle this evening.

[ 4 : 52 ] But it's interesting, isn't it, that they're contrasting books. You've got the book of Ruth, which is the other book, and it's written about a peasant girl. It's written about a poor girl.

It's written about one who is from the oppressed underclass, one who was known for poverty and ordinary village life.

So that's the book of Ruth. A contrast is Esther. And there is no doubt that Esther is a glamorous book. Esther, the word means star.

She was a beautiful woman. Chapter 2 makes that point two or three times. And especially when she went through her six-month, year-long beautification process, she was absolutely stunning. She wasn't a peasant. She ended up, of course, in the palace. She is referred to in Chapter 3 onwards as Queen Esther, King Ahasuerus, gets her.

[ 5 : 54 ] It's not a romantic story by any means. Chapter 2 tells us. It's a story of abuse. It's a story of trafficking. There's a modern ring about it, isn't there, as you read Esther Chapter 2?

Very much part of the kind of Me Too story, as you see the exploitation there of a woman. So there's an underbelly also to the book of Esther, isn't there?

It's not just, as I said earlier, Mills and Boone. It's not just some romantic story. So it's in the Bible. I find it rather intriguing. It is a book named after a woman.

But the third reason, and this is the one that almost every preacher will talk about, God's name is not mentioned once in the whole book of Esther.

In fact, it's somewhat secular. I don't know if any of you read history. There's a great series for young people called Horrible Histories. And the book of Esther reads, well, that's very secular.

[ 6 : 58 ] As I said, God is not mentioned in it at all. And for that reason, it is incredibly intriguing.

But as we will also see that although God's name is not mentioned, God is everywhere. His name is not there, but his fingerprints are all over the book of Esther.

It's also a story. People love a story. That's why soap operas are so popular with certain people.

That's how boxed sets are compelling, as people constantly want to know the next story.

And Esther is like that. Actually, if you read it chapter after chapter, the next chapter is as unbelievable as the chapter before. And it's intriguing to see all these things.

And there's all these literary devices. And there's the sudden reversal of fortune. How things are going one way, and all of a sudden they are dramatically going another way.

[ 8 : 07 ] There's double meanings. There's all sorts of interesting literary devices all through the book. But before we go on, there's a fundamental method of interpreting the Bible that we really must get right.

The big picture in Esther is not that Esther is a good woman and that we should be like Esther. The story of the Bible is not that Vashti here in chapter 1 is someone who was bold and who spoke against King Ahasuerus.

Yes, that's there. But the main story of the Old Testament is the story of the Lord Jesus Christ. And the main story of the Bible is the line running from Genesis to Revelation about how God has provided a saviour.

And so in the book of Esther, we see that God provides a saviour with a small s, Esther. And God provides a saviour with a large s, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And we will certainly see him in chapter 1. And we will see him in every single page of the book of Esther. Remember Jesus said in Luke chapter 24 when he was explaining the Bible to the folk on the road to Emmaus.

[ 9 : 35 ] Of course, he says, Beginning with Moses and the prophets, he explained to them what was said in the scripture concerning himself. And so we will see Jesus here in Esther chapter 1.

We will see him by way of contrast. And we will see him also by way of comparison. And also, we will notice that nothing here is chaotic.

You will see there is a conflict here. There is a conflict in chapter 1. And there is a conflict all through the Bible. There is a conflict between the power of evil and the power of good.

And another point before we move on to our three principal points is that the main concept in the book of Esther is the concept of providence.

It is that God uses small incidental events to change the world.

[10:38] We live in a world where God is not mentioned. Does that mean God doesn't exist? We are in a church culture that doesn't really do signs and wonders much.

It is not something we talk about. We don't talk about miracles. We don't talk about all these things. And so we can assume that God is no longer operating in churches like ours, which can appear to be rather dry.

By no means. That's the point of Esther. Although God is not mentioned, God is still moving. Although God is being pushed to the periphery of our national and civic life, God is still at work. And it's the little things in your life that reveal that God is working in a very powerful and amazing way. Let me ask you, you put your mind back 30 years ago, 40 years ago, 50 years ago. If someone were to say to you, you would be sitting in a pew or in a pulpit in the Free Church in Kenneth Street in Stornoway, you would have said that's absolutely ridiculous.

[12:03] Wherever you are in life at the moment, you're not here by accident. You're here because you have been placed here in such a time as this.

But the wonderful thing is that this is part of a bigger plan leading to the Lord Jesus Christ and his redemption. So tonight, very briefly, what they say, sometimes the perfect sermon is three Ps and a poem.

I can't promise a poem tonight, but there are certainly three Ps. As we look at the passage, we're going to look at power, we're going to look at pride, and we're going to look at providence. So, okay, three Ps without a poem. First of all, then, power. Well, the chapter's all over power. You just need to read verses one and two.

It really lays it on, doesn't it, in the days of Ahasuerus, who reigned from India to Ethiopia. There is power language there, verse two, verse four, verse eight.

[13:12] The power there just drips off the page. The language is huge. The army of Persia and Media, the governors, the nobles. This is really incredible.

It's a picture of power. However, this King Ahasuerus, if you read the NIV, he's known as King Xerxes. He reigned, I googled him, apparently he reigned over 44% of the world's population at that time.

Not 43 or 45, but 44%. He ruled from Pakistan right up through northern Europe, right up to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan.

He ruled over Asia. He ruled right down into Africa. He really was a very powerful person. Indeed, that's spelled out in the text.

From India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces. So, it's located in Iran. If you want a geographical reference, the citadel of Susa is located in Iran, which is very much topical at the moment.

[14:24] A little back story, a little sidebar. A whole crowd of Jewish people, most of them went back to Jerusalem. But a remnant remained in Babylon.

And Esther is one of the main characters. The main character in the story remained behind here in Babylon with her uncle, a man called Mordecai.

But the Persians held all the power. Indeed, someone said that the Jews didn't want to stick their head above the parapet.

One writer says, the nail that doesn't stick out is less likely to be hammered. That's why we see in chapter 2, Esther's uncle says, be quiet.

Don't tell anyone that you're a Jew. Keep your identity secret. And so, the Jewish people lived there largely, quietly, unknown, just getting on with their life.

[15:27] And so, you have this power here. You've got this dominant, godless, pagan, powerful, brutal empire.

An empire that has no word of God. And yet, God moves in it and even through it for his own sovereign purpose.

All things work together for good. Wicked empires work together for good. Godless rulers work together for good.

Does it say that some things work together for good? In our lives, we come across rulers. We come across regimes that we don't like and are not good.

We live in a godless society. Has God ignored us? By no means. He is working things out.

[16:28] And so, there's power here. In one of the contemporary accounts of King Hazael, he describes himself in these terms.

I quote, I am the great king, the king of kings, the king of the lands occupied by many races. I am the king of this great earth.

He didn't have self-esteem issues, clearly. He was someone who was really full of his own importance. It's quite interesting, isn't it?

Maybe this is a male-female perspective. Notice the description, verses 1 to 9, of King Ahasuerus' banquet. And the woman's banquet is described in one verse.

Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the woman in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

Modest compared to the power politics. And so, he was no Puritan, if you look at verses 5 to verse 8.

[17:31] It was ridiculous. The 180 days of feasting. Glasses that were used. No two glasses were the same.

It was a picture of excess and opulence. And the mother of all three bars there in verse 8.

You've almost got a joke there. The edict is, there is no edict. The edict is, there is no compulsion.

And so, you've got this picture of opulence, power, magnificence, and excess.

And again, that's what many people in this island and in this country and in the Western world admire and are intimidated by.

Where is all the power? Let me just apply this in a couple of ways. In two ways. The first application is that we all worship something.

[18:36] We all worship something. What does verse 1 to 9 remind you of? Does it remind you of anything? There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver cords and marble pillars.

What does that remind you of? It's almost an exact description of the furnishings of the tabernacle and the temple. It's a context of worship.

And so, isn't it interesting that the language of the temple and the temple furnishings is used for this particular king. This is his worship.

He is worshiping the creature rather than the creator. He is worshiping things rather than gods. If you look around the skyline of Edinburgh.

You see two skylines. One skyline and one perspective is it's dominated by church steeples.

[19:48] You can see the distinctive steeple of St. Giles. It's a crown. You can see through the towers of New College the steeple of what used to be called the Highland Tallbooth.

You can see church steeples all around because they were built in an age when people worshipped God. But there's another skyline.

And it's the skyline of the St. James Centre Mall. It's the skyline of the office block. It's the skyline of the temples of commerce. You see, we all worship something.

We all have an idol. And so we see here the power. And the power is invested in this idolatry. But remember what God said at the dedication of the temple.

He said in 1 Kings chapter 9. He said, So that's what we see here.

[20:58] God's man, in one sense, is cut off the throne of the temple. And there's an interloper on the throne where God ought to be.

But there's going to be another throne. We saw it this morning in Revelation chapter 5. Which is a great connection here with Esther chapter 1.

That the throne of Ahasuerus is collapsed. And the throne of King Jesus is there. It's elevated. How vacuous is the temple of this world.

It's a hologram with no substance. The tales of contemporary man is a tale told by idiots. Full of sound and fury.

Signifying ultimately nothing. You see here the power. The power. The power of King Ahasuerus is a power based on a shaky foundation.

[22:08] Who do we admire? In this age of celebrity. In this age of dazzle. In this age where people are so vacuous.

King Ahasuerus. And yet at the end of the day the power is empty. And here you have a kingdom. How different. The kingdom of God.

King Ahasuerus banishes a woman. King Jesus takes people in. The king Jesus is one who invites the poor and maimed into his palace.

King Ahasuerus only admitted those who lived in a citadel of Susa. The high and mighty. They were brought in to wine and dine. And yet God is ultimately egalitarian.

Again God brings all types of people to himself. Power. We see here worship.

[ 23 : 08 ] We also see empire. Also the language is the language of temple. But it's also the language of city, isn't it? And again the parallels with Revelation chapter 4 are there.

We have streets of gold here. And we see a contrast to the kingdom of God. It's not loud. It's not brash. It's like a mustard seed.

King Ahasuerus. Who came after King Ahasuerus? Alexander the Great. I only know two things about Alexander the Great. Number one.

His name was Alexander. And number two. He was great. He's largely forgotten about. I'm sure some of you know more about Alexander the Great.

The empires of this world come. And the empires go. And then you have the Romans. And then you have the Nazis. And then you have the Soviets.

[ 24 : 11 ] And nowadays we've got of course great empires and emperors. You're worried about the world just now.

You're worried about the men and women of power. Remember Psalm 2. He who sits in heaven shall laugh.

Isn't that in the great image? Kings of the earth raise himself up against the Lord and his anointed. And he who sits in heaven shall laugh.

The Lord shall scorn them all. At the end. And the empire of this world will end in tears.

I don't know if you Johnny Cash fans. But remember the last song that Johnny Cash ever sang in public.

[ 25 : 08 ] You can YouTube it. Johnny Cash the old country singer. He's singing there. He's old. He's lost his power. His voice is croaking. Remember the song he sings.

You could have it all. He said. My empire of dust. I will let you down. I will make you hurt. The contrast to the kingdom of God.

Is completely different. This is an empire of dust. It will let you down. Whereas the empire of King Jesus. Is completely different. It is an empire that says.

Because he lives. I can see tomorrow. We see here. Power. But then closely connected to that. We see pride. Don't we? We see it all through the chapter. Verse 4. He showed the riches of his royal glory. You see it there in verse 10.

[ 26 : 07 ] In verse 11. He orders people about. Verse 12. He's disobeyed. He becomes enraged. Vashti is an intriguing character.

Here. Here is. The ruler of the known universe. He's the ruler of the greatest. The world. He says. 44% of the population.

The major empire in the world. At this time. And one. Woman. Says. No. And his pride is hurt. Isn't it? You see that in verse 12. He's furious when disobeyed. He's a classic narcissist. He becomes enraged. In verse 22.

He orders the woman to be submissive. And imagine that. He puts a decree out. And he orders. All the women.

[ 27 : 02 ] To respect. Their husband. Respect. Does not come. By decree. Love. Does not come by decree. And yet in his pride.

With power. There comes pride. You shall be as God. C.H. Spurgeon said. Pride. Is the sin. Of human nature.

Because pride says. I will be like God. Pride says. I know better than God. Pride said. I want to be like God. And pride.

Has got an ego. The size of Texas. It's huge. But pride here. Is an awful thing.

Just a little sidebar. There's a lot of drinking. Isn't there? In chapter one. They're drinking there. Six days of drinking. And the inevitable happens.

[ 27 : 58 ] So. The king. And all his buddies. Are drinking. For six days. And then he's got this. Bright idea.

He says. Ah. Queen Vastow. She's very pretty. What I want her to do. Is put on her crown. And in front of all my friends.

I want her to. He sends me to a catwalk. And walk down the room. So all these men. Can look at my. Trophy wife. And he puts this.

To Queen Vastow. And not. Surprisingly. She says. Absolutely. No way. Am I doing that. The classic outcome.

You've seen. You've been on a train. Haven't you? And you've seen. People drinking. And. It starts off at Inverness. And they're drinking. And you know. That by the time they go to Perth.

[ 28 : 54 ] It's going to be inappropriate. You know that all sense is going to go. Some of you live with folk who drink. Some of you. Yourself. Maybe have a secret drink problem.

You know what it can do to you. It can take your inhibitions away. It can remove. All these things from you. Strange things happen. When you drink too much.

But. The point of Vesta chapter one. Is not ultimately a. Anti-drink polemic. But you see. Pride here. Is exposed. Pride is unmasked by the drink. Pride uses people for selfish ends. Pride sees people as objects.

And we find here. That King Ohazel Harris. Objectifies. His dear wife. He uses people. Verse 11. Come show yourself.

[ 29 : 50 ] Wearing your crown. Now this was a culture of. Of modesty. You know. You've seen. We see shades. Which is now with. Islamic ladies will wear.

Barkas. It's a modest culture. They don't. Reveal themselves. Eastern people. Don't flaunt themselves. It was absolutely awful. In verse 12.

The Queen said. No. For Vashti. It cost the crown. But as I read that chapter. I think of. Another woman.

Another vulnerable woman. In John chapter 4. I think of Jesus. And the woman. At the well. And I think also. Of Jesus.

And the woman. Taken in adultery. Erxes. Or Ahasuerus. Maximized their shame. Jesus. Wanted to diminish. The woman's shame.

[ 30 : 48 ] Ahasuerus. Wanted his law. To dominate. And subjugate. Women. And Jesus. Had the law. Of love. And it. Elevated women.

It gave women. Dignity. It gave women. Honor. Honor. It's a great book. By a man called. Tom Holland. It's called. Dominion. And it makes the point.

That the liberation. And the dignity. That women enjoy today. Is. The source of that. Is. In the Lord. Jesus. Christ. Who gave them.

Dignity. Because. He is God. Of course. Jesus. Fulfilled the law. To free. Men. And women. King Ahasuerus.

Used the law. For his self-centered. This end. Whereas. Jesus. Fulfilled the law. And met. The law's demands. Power.

[ 31 : 48 ] Pride. But lastly. And perhaps. Most significantly. Providence. A key verse here. Is in verse 19.

Which I read. Let her royal position. Be given to someone else. What you see in chapter 1. Indeed. The whole book of Esther.

Are multiple. Small. Actions. Most of them. Bad. The feast. Was a bad decision.

The decision. To banish. The queen. Was a bad decision. He picked. The wrong queen. To have an argument. With Vashti. The bad advice. He was given.

To banish. The queen. Tiny little things. All of them. Seem to be. Bad decisions. And yet. God. Takes them.

[ 32 : 43 ] To provide. A savior. If. Queen. Vashti. Had not. Been. Deposed. Queen. Esther. Would never. Become. The queen.

If queen. Esther. Had not. Become. Queen. Haman. The wicked man. Had a plan. To annihilate. All the Jews. If.

Esther. Had not. Been put. In. To the palace. At a particular. Time. If. Mordecai. Her uncle. Had not been given. A particular. Position. At the king's gate.

All these. Little. Things. Work. To the salvation. Of the Jewish people. And beyond that. Point.

To the salvation. Of the human. Race. At least. Those. For whom. Christ. Has died. Is. God. Really. [ 33 : 37 ] Present. I was reading. Two weeks ago. An essay. By a man. Called. Bart. Ehrman.

Bart. Ehrman. Was. A. Wheaton. Educating. An evangelical. Divinity. School. In the U.S. He was an evangelical. New Testament.

Professor. But he renounced. His evangelical. Faith. And this is what he wrote. Faith. Faith. In the Christian tradition. Has a God who intervenes.

He says. That's what the Exodus event is. And that's what crucifixion is. It's a God who intervenes. And when I look around this world. I don't see a God who intervenes.

Is that what your life is like just now? You don't see a God who intervenes. You don't see a God who intervenes. In your cancer diagnosis. You don't see a God who intervenes.

[ 34 : 41 ] In the world stage. You don't see a God who intervenes. In your domestic situation. You come to church here. Week after week after week. And you don't see a God who intervenes.

And maybe even tonight. You said. This is the last night. I'm coming to church. Because God is not there. Isn't Esther 1 a breath of fresh air?

Because it describes your life just now. A chapter of the Bible where God is not mentioned. A whole book of the Bible where God is not mentioned.

But here's the thing. One of the big themes of Esther 1 is that of a hidden God. God sometimes hides.

Isaiah 8 verse 17 says. I will wait for the Lord. Who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will hope in him.

[ 35 : 50 ] Isaiah again 45. Truly you're a God who hides yourself. O God of Israel. The Savior. If you hear nothing else tonight.

Hear this. The hidden God. Is not the same as the absent God. The silent God.

Is not the same as the absent God. Here we are tonight. It's all very quiet. All very serene.

All very calm. No drama. No signs and wonders. No noise. It's quiet.

There's somewhere else where maybe it is noisy. There's drama. There's excitement. God works. Often.

[ 36 : 50 ] God works. Mostly. In silence. Our world. Looks like Esther's world.

But God was moving events. Towards a great end. Towards the salvation of the Jewish people. God is moving the events of the world.

He. The plan. In the Bible. Is the great plan. Of redemption. The key idea here.

Of providence. Is. That God is at work. Under the surface. Does that make God any less? You've. We're. Drawn to a conclusion here. But there's two. Views. In Esther. There's. People draw lots. Don't they? Luck. And there's providence.

[ 37 : 51 ] Fate. And the drawing of lots. Random. Providence. And the hidden hand of God. Everything. Is pointing.

Towards this night. That you are here. For such a time as this. And that there is. Nothing.

Happens. In your life. That God has not planned. I remember walking once. When it was.

1981. In George Square. In Glasgow. Walking under a scaffolding. And a huge. Clamp. Fell.

From the top of a building. Just missed me. I've got a pretty hard head. But I think.

[ 38 : 45 ] One millisecond later. That would have gone right through me. You've got the same story. In your life. You're here tonight. Spared.

So that God. Is doing something. Drawing you. To himself. Here we see. A woman. Whose bold action. Leads to the salvation.

Of the people. This points. To Jesus. Esther. Is the last. Of the narrative books. Of the Bible. It's the last. Of the story books.

In the Bible. The first story book. Of course. Is Genesis. And all the stories. Are told. Right through to Esther. And you actually find. That the miraculous. Diminishes.

As the. Old Testament. Storyline. Goes on. There are. A lot of miracles. And Genesis. And Exodus. You know. The parting of the Red Sea. And water. Gushing out of a rock.

[ 39 : 42 ] And you know. Folk being fed. With manna. There's miracles. There's miracles everywhere. But by the time you get. To the last. Narrative story. Esther. It all stops.

Miracles diminish. And there is silence. After. Esther. Silence to the book of Malachi.

And then 400 years later. Jesus appears. He is. The ultimate savior.

These are all. Chains that led. To Jesus. Coming. And being our savior. Is.

God. Absent. Look around. And you say. Yes. Look at the Bible. No. And he says.

[ 40 : 42 ] No. You're here tonight. For a purpose. And God. Is speaking to you. Through the Bible.

No drama. Just God. Father. We bow in your presence. We thank you. For who you are. We ask a question.

Is God absent? Listen. And we bless you. That he is not. And we thank you. That he is even not silent. If we have ears.

Let us listen. Bless us. And be with us now. Amen. We refer to Psalm 2.

Let's now sing it. In the Sing Psalms version. Psalm 2. Page 2. Why do the heathen nations rage?  
[ 41 : 46 ] Why do the peoples plot in vain? Earth's kings combine in enmity. Her rulers join against  
God's reign. Psalm 2.

We'll sing to verse 6. Why do the heathen nations rage? Why do the people plot in vain?  
As kings combine in enmity. Why do the people plot in vain?  
As kings combine in enmity. As kings combine in enmity. Our rulers join against those things.  
They take their stand against the Lord. And judges shall avoid him on.  
[ 43 : 03 ] Let us break off their chains from us.

Where there is safe. Let us be done. The one that ruled in heaven was.  
The Lord on high behinds them all. The Lord has made it known to them.  
The Lord has made it known to them. The Lord has made it known to them. My chosen King, God  
and the Lord has made it known to them. The Lord has made it known to them. My chosen King,  
God and the Lord has made it known to them. The Lord has made it known to them. My chosen  
King, God and the Lord has made it known to them.  
And terror of them all. The Lord has made it known to them.  
[ 44 : 09 ] My chosen King I have installed. On Zion, Zion, Holy Day.

He is the one where my God is. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father,  
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and always.  
Amen. Amen. Thank you.