

Text: Esther 1

Theme: The Question in Esther: Where is God?

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 17/07/2016 at 10:30am

Esther is a story about a time in Israelite history when it seemed God was not at work, and His promises to Israel had failed. Has it ever seemed to you that God is too distant to hear your prayers - or too busy to be concerned with you or your life? Have you ever wondered if God really was out there? Have you ever wondered why he doesn't reveal Himself more clearly? Have you ever wondered where he is when everything seems to be going wrong?

The book of Esther answers these questions - but in a way you will never imagine. And rather than keep you in suspense, I might as well just tell you now - God is not in the book of Esther. When you read it - and I encourage you to do so - you will find that God appears to be absent. The word "God" is not found once in the entire book. Neither is there any mention of worship or faith. There is no prediction of the Messiah. There is no mention of heaven or hell. We do not even see anyone praying in Esther. We do see people fasting, but there is no mention of prayer that normally accompanies fasting.

And so it is surprising to some to see this book within the pages of our Bible. In fact, some throughout history have thought that this book should not belong in our Bibles. So why is this book in our Bibles? Well, I think it can be summarized from a verse in Romans. Romans 8:28 says, "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose." As we will see in the book of Esther, God is at work in all things for the good of those who have been called according to his purpose - even when we can't see Him.

In fact, the name of the book, Esther, implies this! Her Hebrew name was Hadassah, but when she became queen they gave her a Persian name Esther. Some believe that she was named after the Persian goddess of love, Ishtar. But Gesenius, one of the greatest Hebrew authorities, says that the name Esther is derived from the word meaning "to hide." Therefore, Esther means "something hidden."

And indeed, there is much that is hidden in the book of Esther. There are certain key pieces of information that are hidden from almost everyone but us - the readers. We see it all, but the characters of the story do not. There is always something going on behind the scenes. There is always more than meets the eye. There is always more in the works than any individual is aware of.

And all of the events of the story come together so perfectly that it is hard to miss the biggest piece of hidden information in the story - God. God is intentionally left out so that when we read the story, we cannot miss Him. Some Godless men may look upon the events as chance, coincidence of amazing circumstances, but we know better, and we see God everywhere.

There was a young man once who was searching for God, and he heard of a wise old Christian who had a very close relationship with God. So the young man went and visited the older man and said to him "Sir, I want to see God. I have searched for Him and cannot find Him. Can you show Him to me?" The old man looked at him for a moment. Then he looked at the trees overhead. Then he looked at the blue sky and the blazing sun. Next he glanced over to some children playing a game in a field. Then he turned again to the young man and said, "I'm sorry. I cannot help you."

The young man became angry. "Why not? Don't you know how I can see God?"

The old man patiently responded, "The reason I cannot help you see God, is because I see Him everywhere I look. I do not understand how you miss Him. If you do not see Him anywhere, I cannot help you."

This is the way it is with Esther. God is everywhere in the book, even though He is not mentioned even one time.

So, when you ask, "Where is God?" The author of Esther responds "Where is God not?" God, it is true, has exercised his sovereignty on the front stage, in the spotlight, through miracles and wonders and signs, like the parting of the Red Sea and the sun standing still, and walls of Jericho falling down. But He also frequently exercises his sovereignty from behind the curtain. God does not only work in showmanship and in the centre ring. God is still in the business of miracles even when they are not flashy. He can work as much through circumstances and human events as He can through water from a rock and a pillar of fire. "The complete absence of God from the text, is the genius of the book." He is the biggest piece of hidden information in the book. At the time Esther was written, this was one of the biggest questions they were asking.

Xerxes was in the third year of his reign, having defeated Egypt at war, when he gave a great banquet. Verse 4 tells us that the banquet lasted 180 days and was an extravagant exhibition of King Xerxes' greatness and wealth. This banquet was probably given as a reward to military officers and noblemen from all over the kingdom and was possibly also an opportunity to plan for the upcoming invasion of Greece.

At the end of the six-month-long banquet, King Xerxes gave another banquet that lasted seven days. This banquet was for everyone who lived in the citadel of Susa. No-one was excluded, from the greatest to the least. Again, it was a lavish banquet. Verse 7 records that: 'Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality.' **The guests could drink a little or a lot, or not at all if they chose. Everyone was free to do as they wished.** Now normally, the people drank as the king drank. If he stayed sober, so would they. If he got drunk, so would they. But here, the king orders that everyone drinks as much or as little as he wants.

Verse 6 describes the garden of the king's palace in Susa and shows that life in the Persian Court during King Xerxes' reign was luxurious. They feasted on fine foods and drank from gold cups. The Persian court was dripping with wealth and extravagance.

King Xerxes was an incredibly powerful and proud king. At the beginning of his reign he was the most powerful man on earth. Archaeologists excavating at Susa have found inscriptions from that time in which **King Xerxes refers to himself as, The great King, The King of Kings; The King of the lands occupied by many races; The King of this great earth.'** He obviously thought a lot of himself and very little about the God of Israel.

In contrast, read Philippians 2:5-11. Compare Xerxes' pride with the humility of Jesus, the true 'King of kings'. In his pride, Xerxes believed that he was greater than God Himself. How do you view yourself? Does your attitude reflect the humility of Jesus or are you tempted to believe that you are more important than God and others?

True greatness is demonstrated in humble self-sacrifice. Jesus said, How do we respond when we're asked or pressured to behave in a way that opposes God's design for us?

Unsurprisingly, the seven-day garden party led to excess and inappropriate behaviour on the part of King Xerxes. **He wanted to show off his beautiful wife, Queen Vashti, for all his drunken guests to enjoy (w. 10-11).** It's unclear whether the king was ordering Vashti to

appear in just her royal crown and no other clothing or whether he wanted her to appear unveiled before his male guests to show off her beautiful face. **To appear in court without her veil would have been scandalous in those times and Vashti would have suffered a loss of dignity and respect from the palace staff and royal officials who were all present.** Either way it was a demeaning request for Xerxes to make of his wife, and Vashti courageously refused (v. 12).

Was Vashti right to disobey Xerxes? More importantly for us, in light of the New Testament commands for wives to be submissive to their husbands, are there circumstances in which it would be right for a Christian wife to disobey? The apostle Paul is clear in his letters that God's design for marriage is that husbands should love their wives 'as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her' and that a wife is to submit to husband 'as ... to the Lord' (Eph. 5:22-25). But God's command for a wife to submit to her husband is not without limits; she submits to him 'as ... to the Lord'. He hasn't given a husband the right to fulfil any sinful or self-serving desire he might have through the unthinking obedience of his wife. He doesn't require a woman to lose the dignity she has as a human being made in the image of God by allowing her godly principles to be trampled underfoot by an ungodly husband. The authority that a man has is given to him by God. So when he disobeys or dishonours the Lord with that authority, there is a higher authority to which a woman must submit. She must obey and honour Jesus.

Vashti's refusal to obey her husband's order was a dignified response to an undignified request. It demonstrated great bravery for her to oppose the powerful king in this way and verse 12 tells us that 'the king became furious and burned with anger'.

Xerxes wanted to flaunt his queen's beauty in the same way he flaunted his wealth and power. She was a trophy; an object to add value to his status. Modern attitudes towards women are often just as degrading and devaluing. But God's design for manhood and womanhood is both good and loving. He gives dignity to men and women and in Jesus both find equal worth and significance [Gal. 3:28].

Queen Vashti's refusal to obey the king's order angered Xerxes and triggered a vengeful response. He sought counsel from his closest advisors, who are listed by name (v. 14) to distinguish them from the eunuchs who had been sent to bring Vashti before him earlier (v. 10). In response to Vashti's refusal, he flies into one of his famous fits of rage. Before, he was merry. Now he is mad. That is the way it is with drinking. Some drinking is not wrong, but getting drunk causes a person to lose all control of themselves, and generally a person can go from being happy to being furious in just the span of a few seconds. Let's see what he does in his drunken rage in Esther 1:13.

Political Wisdom (Esther 1:13-22)

Esther 1:13-15. Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times (for this was the king's manner toward all who knew law and justice, those closest to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who had access to the king's presence, and who ranked highest in the kingdom): "What shall we do to Queen Vashti, according to law, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus brought to her by the eunuchs?"

Now notice again how much detail is given to the Kings advisors. It is almost sarcasm we see dripping from these pages. They are experts in matters of law, they understood the times, they had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom. Now watch how foolishly they act.

Esther 1:16. And Memucan answered before the king and the princes: “Queen Vashti has not only wronged the king, but also all the princes, and all the people who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.”

Memucan speaks up, and right away he’s making a mountain out of molehill. “What began as an issue between two people suddenly is escalated into a crisis of empire-wide proportions.” (17)

These advisors are described in verse 13 as 'wise men who understood the times', but their advice on this occasion sprang from fear that they, along with all other men in the kingdom, were about to lose control of their wives and suffer disrespect and discord once news of Vashti's 'conduct' was made public.

The proposed solution was twofold: first, to demean Queen Vashti by banishing her from the king's presence and giving her position to someone 'better' (v. 19); second, to continue the domination of women throughout the empire by issuing a decree that would further diminish their role in society [v. 20].

Today this reads as a gross overreaction fuelled by pride and paranoia. The wealthiest, most powerful man on the earth, in a drunken moment, followed foolish advice and made a rash decision resulting in the dethronement and banishment of his beautiful queen. The decree that Vashti could never again enter the king's presence was made public throughout each province of the kingdom and irreversible by the law of the Medes and Persians.

“Their decision to demand honour from their wives by an empire-wide edict would have actually achieved [the exact opposite of what they wanted!]”. They were afraid that women would find out about Vashti’s disobedience, and now these “wise counsellors” had assured that everyone would hear of it! It is really quite laughable.

But in the midst of all that was happening in the palace, God was working on behalf of His people. He was committed to His promise to preserve them and keep them from being wiped out. **He had already prepared someone to fill the space made in the king's household by the banishment of Vashti. King Xerxes had displayed his splendour, majesty and wealth for six months, but the Lord was the true ruler in Susa; silent but sovereign, He was working for His people's deliverance and salvation.**

Maybe you've experienced devastating blows in the past that you've not yet recovered from. Maybe fears about the future overwhelm you. Perhaps you're currently experiencing trials that threaten to pull you under a rising tide of despair and doubt. In the midst of such desperation, God is there. The book of Esther shows us that He doesn't stand by passively, watching His people suffer, but He is actively working to bring about their deliverance.

In 2008 tragedy struck the family of Christian singer Steven Curtis Chapman and his wife, Mary Beth, when one of their daughters was hit and killed by her older brother as she ran in front of the car he was driving. As she buried her five-year-old daughter, Mary Beth cried, 'God, where were you? Where are you?' A year later she wrote these words on her blog:

*It might on certain days be buried deep down in my heart... but here is what I know and what I choose to believe, over and over again. I know God loves me and my family. I know God is sovereign and He knows what is best for us. I know He has our days numbered and makes **no** mistakes. I know that He will bring beauty from ashes... that is what I cling to in order to make it through another twenty-four hours ... I have to **choose** to believe this right now.¹*

It is often the case that we have to *choose* to see God in the midst of trials and difficulties. It is a choice to believe that He is sovereign. It is a choice to trust Him, even when we can't see what He is doing.