

Main Idea: In Esther 1, we see how God used a domestic squabble to fulfill His plan for His people. We’re going to do two things. First, ponder the story, and second, ponder the significance.

I. Ponder the story.

- A. Scene #1: A king threw a party (1-8).
 - 1. Xerxes was powerful (1-2).
 - 2. His party was impressive (3-8).
- B. Scene #2: The king's party went sour (9-12).
 - 1. Xerxes made a foolish decision.
 - 2. Vashti refused to cooperate.
- C. Scene #3: The king sought counsel (13-18).
 - 1. Xerxes stated: "I've got a wife problem." (15)
 - 2. Memucan responded: "You've got a kingdom problem!" (16-18)
- D. Scene #4: The counselor gave his recommendation (19-20).
 - 1. Banish Vashti.
 - 2. Get another queen.
 - 3. Do it publicly.
- E. Scene #5: The king followed the advice (21-22).

II. Ponder the significance.

- A. Though God may be hidden, He's not absent.
 - 1. There's no mention of God in Esther.
 - 2. But ... He is there.
- B. Though life may seem out of control, it's not.
 - 1. God is at work.
 - 2. God has a purpose.
- C. Regardless of how we feel, we must choose to trust God.

Sometimes God seems very near and very involved in our lives. Those are precious times, aren't they?

There are also times in life, however, when God seems distant. These times often coincide with ongoing painful circumstances.

Last Saturday night I was awakened during the night by a familiar round of migraine pain. This particular migraine didn't leave until Wednesday. It was another season of calling on the Lord from dark rooms, waiting for the pain to leave, and at least part of the time, pondering a question...

What is God doing when it doesn't seem like God is doing anything?

Granted, we know He is always at work, for He is sovereign, wise, and good. But what is He doing when it doesn't *seem* like He is doing anything. Emphasis on *seem*.

During this bout with migraine pain, I found myself thinking of an Old Testament book that addresses this question. There is nothing new under the sun, including this question.

But it's not just my personal pain. Or yours, for that matter. It's the global situation too. And what's happening to God's people worldwide. The atrocities in Iraq, and Syria, and North Korea. And the moral free-for-all in our country.

What *is* God doing when it doesn't seem like God is doing anything?

^{**}Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Esther series at WBC in 1999.

I want us to explore this wonderful book together in a series entitled, “*When God Seems Distant.*” It’s the book of Esther, a book that doesn’t even mention the name of God one time. And yet, even when He isn’t mentioned, even when He seems distant, He most certainly is at work.

What’s He doing? We’re going to find out.

First, the context. It was a low time in Israel’s history. The glory days of Solomon were a distant memory for the chosen people of God. There wasn’t much to celebrate if you were a Jew in the fifth century B.C.

True, the Babylonian captivity was over, at least officially. In 538 B.C. a remnant of Jews left Babylon and returned to the Promised Land. The temple rebuilding was finished in 516 B.C.

But facts are facts. And the fact of the matter is that though some Jews returned home, the majority did *not*. They’d grown accustomed to their new life away from the temple, and away from the land of God’s promise. They simply chose to disobey the commands of prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel who had said, “God wants you to return home,” and they stayed put in foreign lands. They figured life wasn’t grand, but at least it was more comfortable than back in the ruins of Israel.

What does God do when His people ignore Him? Is His faithfulness contingent upon ours? When we break our promises, does He break His?

There’s an amazing, often neglected book in the Bible that answers these questions for us in living color. It’s a storybook. It’s the book of *Esther*.

We serve a God who is faithful and trustworthy. But aren’t there times when He seems distant, silent, and hidden? How do you explain those times? How do you make sense of them? The book of Esther can help.

Just how involved in our lives is God? This morning you probably drove your car to this building. On your way you passed many cars. Just think. If just one of them had swerved but a couple of feet to the left, you would have experienced a head-on collision and you wouldn’t be here. But that didn’t happen, and you are here.

Did God have anything to do with that *non-event*?

I want to affirm a key biblical truth at this point, and then spend the next ten weeks or so showing you the truth in action. Here it is. *There is not one detail in our lives outside of God’s intimate control, even when He seems distant, which at times, He does.*

And with that in mind, let the story begin. Let’s listen to Esther 1.

Doesn’t sound like the Bible, does it? What’s going on? We’re going to ponder the significance momentarily, but first, let’s ponder carefully this curious story.

I. Ponder the story.

Esther is one of two books in the Bible named for a woman, the other being Ruth. By Jewish readers the book is called “The Megillah” (*the Scroll*) because of its immense popularity. It continues to be a favorite in Jewish communities, and is read in the family every year at Purim. Esther contains the account of the Feast of Purim, and recalls a time when the Jews were able to turn the tables on those who wanted to kill them.

The book itself is anonymous. Augustine suggested that Ezra wrote it, while others have proposed Mordecai did, but the fact is we simply don’t know for sure.

In the narrative of Esther 1, we see a domestic squabble. A nasty, I'll-show-him and I'll-show-her fight in the palace. And God is at work through it all.

There are five scenes in chapter one.

A. Scene #1: A king threw a party (1-8). "This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush:² At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa,³ and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present.

⁴ For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.⁵ When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest, who were in the citadel of Susa.⁶ The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones.⁷ 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.⁸ By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished."

The story begins with the spotlight shining, not on a Jewish king, but on a Gentile ruler who reigns, not in Jerusalem, but in Susa, the winter capital of Persia. The king's name is Xerxes, or in the Hebrew, Ahasuerus. In the first two verses we learn something significant about this king.

1. Xerxes was powerful (1-2). Very powerful. Xerxes reigned from 486-465 B.C. He was a great builder who completed and improved the great palaces which his father, Darius, had begun. He ruled 127 provinces, from India to Cush (northern Sudan).

Xerxes reigned from his throne in the "citadel" of Susa. The term refers to a fortified acropolis, a palace complex within the city. Susa was the winter residence of the Persian kings.

By the way, in the summer Susa was unbearably hot. Strabo, the Greek geographer said Susa was so hot that lizards and snakes burned to death if they crossed the street at noon and that cold water placed in the sun could be used for a bath immediately!²

In the third year of his reign (verse 3), which would have been 483 B.C., Xerxes decided to throw a party. But this was no ordinary party.

2. His party was impressive (3-8). According to verse 3, he invited all his nobles and officials. Apparently, having finished his building projects in Susa, Xerxes thought it was time to celebrate.

And celebrate they did! Even the military leaders of Persia and Media were included on the guest list. It's quite possible that in addition to partying, Xerxes wanted to use this time with his key officials and officers to plan for his upcoming attack on the Greeks (that three year campaign began the following year).

That may help explain the length of the banquet. Verse 4 indicates it lasted for a full 180 days, during which time the king displayed his vast wealth.

² Huey, 798.

Ctesias, who was the court physician to Artaxerxes Mnemon, said that as many as 15,000 guests were entertained at his king's banquet. King Assurnasirpal of Assyria was reported to have entertained 69,574 guests for ten days in one of his banquets.

At the end of the six month blowout, guess what Xerxes did? He threw another party! According to verse 5, this banquet lasted seven days and was given for all the men in the citadel, from the least to the greatest. This banquet was held outside in the king's enclosed garden.

The narrator describes the splendor of the pavilion in verse 6. There were colorful hangings attached to marble pillars, covering elaborate gold and silver couches, lined by beautiful mosaic pavement.

And the wine flowed, served in goblets of gold (7). By the king's command, every guest was allowed to drink whatever he wanted, with personal attendants at their service. According to Herodotus and Xenophon there was a law that whenever the king drank, everyone drank.³

A word of explanation is in order at this point. The book of Esther is a narrative, a story. It tells what happened, not necessarily what should have happened. When it mentions an activity, the author's intent is not to condone nor condemn it. He's simply saying, "This is what happened."

One commentator observes, "As compared with modern story-telling this presentation is entirely objective; the author avoids comment, attempts no character study, no psychological interpretation, passes no judgment. The reader is left to make his own deductions, and no doubt the original Jewish members...were quick to do so."⁴

Before us is a pagan king surrounded by pagan administrators living in a pagan society. Xerxes isn't interested in the Lord one iota, let alone in holiness. Yet, as we'll be seeing, even when paganism is rampant, God is still at work fulfilling His plan.

So that's the first scene. A king threw a party.

B. Scene #2: The king's party went sour (9-12). Verse 9 indicates that Xerxes' party wasn't the only one in town: "Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes." Why the segregated parties? It doesn't seem to have been due to Persian culture, for later in the book Esther will give her own party and entertain the king and Haman. Maybe the size of the guest-list made the dual party setup necessary.

We're not told why. But we are told that on day seven the king's party fizzled in a hurry. Here's what happened. First...

1. Xerxes made a foolish decision. Verse 10, "On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine [the Hebrew word can mean anything from "cheerful" to "drunk;" As we'll see, the king wasn't thinking too clearly!], he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him -- Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas -- ¹¹ to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown [the Hebrew is "turban"], in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at."

³Baldwin, p. 58.

⁴Baldwin, 63.

Sin becomes boring. By that I mean that it does not satisfy. What may be a thrill the first time you try it demands something bigger the next time. It's a case of, "Can you top this?"

After seven days of drinking and frivolity, Xerxes made a decision I doubt he would have made had he been sober. He commanded his officials to bring his wife to the party so he could show her off to his male audience. It seemed like a good idea to him, a good way to liven up the party.

So the officials went to retrieve the queen. But...

2. *Vashti refused to cooperate.* Verse 12, "But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger."

Why did Vashti refuse? For one thing, she had her own party going. Or perhaps it was for moral reasons. She wasn't an *object*, and she wasn't interested in degrading herself before the king's drunken guests. So she refused to come.

And the king became irate! His wife had punctured his male ego. He'd bragged to his buddies about his wife. He'd given an order for her to come. And she said *no!*

The king had a problem, didn't he? He may have ruled 127 provinces from India to Cush, but right now he's got a wife who isn't marching to his orders.

C. Scene #3: The king sought counsel (13-18). Not a bad thing to do when you're in the midst of a marital spat. Just make sure you seek godly counsel, which, of course, Xerxes did not do.

Notice verse 13, "Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times ¹⁴ and were closest to the king -- Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.

¹⁵ "According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?" he asked. "She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her."

I'm intrigued by how Xerxes viewed his predicament. In essence...

1. *Xerxes stated: "I've got a wife problem." (15)* Every married person in this room knows that no marriage is exempt from interpersonal strain. Put two sinners together under the same roof, two people who by nature are self-seeking, and look out!

So Xerxes had a marriage problem on his hands. Of course, from his perspective the problem wasn't with *him*, but with *her*. Isn't that the way it usually is? Never mind he'd just asked his wife to degrade herself before a bunch of drunken men. In his mind, *she* is the problem.

Then Memucan spoke up as the lead counselor. Frankly, he didn't help much, but here's his assessment, "Um, king, your highness, excuse me, but it's worse than you think. You don't just have a *wife* problem. You've got...a *kingdom* problem."

2. *Memucan responded: "You've got a kingdom problem!" (16-18)* Listen to verses 16-18, "Then Memucan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, "Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. ¹⁷ For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' ¹⁸ This

very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord."

J. Vernon McGee says Memucan sounds like a "hen-pecked husband." In his advise to the king, Memucan said that Vashti had done "wrong" (the Hebrew means "to be crooked"), not only to the king but also to all the nobles and all the people in the kingdom. In other words, Memucan was saying (as McGee puts it), "King, something must be done about this, because if not, I dare not go home!"

Sort of reminds me of the henpecked husband who came to the office one morning and boasted, "Last night my wife was down on her knees before me." One of the fellows, knowing the situation, was a little skeptical. So he said, "Really? What were the circumstances, and what exactly did she say to you?" The husband looked a little embarrassed and admitted, "Well, she was down on her knees, looking under the bed, and she said, 'Come out from under there, you coward!'"⁵

I get the sense that was Memucan. Maybe his wife was over at the ladies' party. He could just imagine the scene when the rest of the women at Vashti's banquet saw the queen put her foot down in defiance of the king.

"King, will all due respect, this is bigger than you! It's just a matter of time before *all* the women of the kingdom find out what the first lady did to you (17), and then they'll follow suit (18). And then, "There will be no end of disrespect and discord (18)."

D. Scene #4: The counselor gave his recommendation (19-20). Memucan continues speaking in verse 19-20, "Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she.²⁰ Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest."

Here's Memucan's threefold recommendation.

1. *Banish Vashti.*
2. *Get another queen.* And...
3. *Do it publicly.* Don't just sweep this thing under the rug. Take care of this fiasco and put it on prime time. Make sure the king's edict is proclaimed "throughout all his vast realm (20)." Then we'll get some mileage out of this potential disaster.

According to Memucan, if you do this king, "All the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest (20)."

E. Scene #5: The king followed the advice (21-22). "The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed.²² He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people's tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household."

One of Satan's devious tactics is twisting the truth. He's doing it today when it comes to the subject of roles in marriage. He's convinced some to *deny* role distinctions, and others to *reinterpret* role distinctions. He does the latter here.

⁵ McGee, 37.

According to Xerxes' proclamation, every man was to be *ruler* over his own household. Ruler? According to God's Word, men are to be *leaders* of their homes, yes, but rulers? No.

Ephesians 5:23, 25 "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church...Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her."

Colossians 3:19 "Husbands, love your wives and do not be harsh with them."

1 Peter 3:7 "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers."

Xerxes was quite a character, wasn't he? Rather than dealing with his marital squabble sensibly, he passed a law to banish Vashti. Talk about overreacting! It's like using a canon to eliminate a fly.

I read an insightful account about another event in Xerxes' life. A couple of years later Xerxes took his army, the largest ever marshaled at that time, and went to battle against the Greeks. He made it as far as Thermopylae. He also led a fleet of three hundred ships, which to his surprise were destroyed at Salamis. After that defeat, in a fit of madness Xerxes went down to the sea and beat the waves with a belt for destroying his fleet.

So here's a man who had a problem with his temper, and in a fit of rage, did something he would later regret (as we'll see in chapter 2; see 2:1).

Quite a story, huh? Perhaps you're thinking at this point, "This is in the Bible? I don't get it. Why would God want us to know about some egotistic king who dumped his wife 2,500 years ago? What's the take away for us from Esther 1?"

II. Ponder the significance.

Some would say there is no significance. Throughout history many have struggled with whether the book should even be in the Bible. Not a single Christian commentary was written on Esther during the first seven centuries of the church's existence. And later, neither Luther nor Calvin wrote a commentary on Esther. In fact, Luther said the book had no place in the canon of Scripture. In his *Table Talk* he said this about 2 Maccabees and Esther, "I wish that they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too much and have much heathen perverseness."

But Esther does exist, and Esther *is* in the Bible, not by accident but by God's design. What's more, as we'll see, Esther *is* loaded with significance for us.

Let's start here. 2 Timothy 3:16 states that *all* Scripture is profitable and useful. There is God-intended take away in every Old Testament (and New Testament) text. That includes Esther.

I'm convinced we need the message of Esther. Perhaps now more than ever.

Today, we as the people of God, like the Jews in the fifth century BC, are living in a pagan society. Like them, we are a minority. Like them, we've watched scandalous events occur in the highest office in the land. And like them, we feel helpless at times wondering where all this is heading.

At a time like this we need the book of Esther. What does Esther say to us? In Esther 1 we discover three very practical and timely truths.

A. Though God may be hidden, He's not absent. One of the reasons people have questioned the value of Esther, frankly, is this.

1. *There's no mention of God in Esther.* You will not find the name of God mentioned anywhere in the book. Neither will you find any mention of sacrifice, the Scriptures, or even prayer. The closest thing to a "spiritual" discipline is a reference to fasting in 4:16.

As we just read chapter one, we heard not one mention of God. Not one. All we have is a story about a pagan king, his pagan friends, a marital spat, and a foolish law crafted by some politicians more interested in defending their turf than righteousness.

Where is God in all this? He's not mentioned. So you might conclude that He's not there.

2. *But ... He is there.* Esther shows us that even in a distant, far away country, God's beloved people are still in His hands.

Esther portrays for us the doctrine of God's *providence*. The God of the Bible is the God who uses the most ordinary circumstances to accomplish His purpose. Though you won't find His name in Esther, you'll certainly find Him. God orchestrates event after event to fulfill His plan. In Esther, God works *behind the scenes*, which, by the way, is the way God *usually* works.

Can God miraculously eliminate adversity? Can He heal a body that's full of cancer? Can He turn five loaves of bread into a meal for five thousand hungry men? Certainly, God can do that. And at times He does.

But not typically. Usually, He works quietly, methodically, purposefully *behind the scenes*, just like He did in Esther.

The God we meet in Esther, who of course is the true and living God (all others are false creations), this God can take a marriage squabble and use it to bring honor to Himself and good to His people.

You say, "I didn't see that in Esther 1." No, but if you keep reading you *will*. You will discover this amazing truth again and again. Though God may be hidden, He's not absent.

A second truth...

B. Though life may seem out of control, it's not. Quite frankly, Esther 1 doesn't make much sense...*yet*. Right now the events seem bizarre, even chaotic. Perhaps like your life feels. But just wait until we see the Jews rejoicing in chapter 9.

In the mean time be assured of two things about God.

1. *God is at work.* He's not a passive spectator. Never. He's actively involved in the affairs of this world, *His* world. And not just in a general Deist sort of way, either. He is intimately involved in the details of our lives, yours and mine. He's at work.

What's more...

2. *God has a purpose.* It's not just that God is busy doing *something*, but that He's at work fulfilling His good *purpose*. He has a plan. History is *His* story.

We may wonder, "Does God have anything to do with what happens in the secular world where we live?" And the answer from Esther is *yes*, more than our finite minds could ever comprehend. He's not only watching. He's *working*.

There may be times when life seems out of control, but it's not. The Sovereign Lord is at work fulfilling His eternal purpose. In essence, that's the message of Esther.

God used a sensual, pagan king who threw a party to set in motion a plan by which He would rescue His people from a near holocaust.

But that's not all. As we move through the story in future weeks, we're going to see a Jewish orphan girl named Esther just "happen" to win a beauty contest. Her prize? She becomes Xerxes's wife, the queen of the kingdom.

Yet that's not all. The girl's uncle, Mordecai, just "happens" to uncover an assassination plot against the king, but his good deed goes unnoticed. Until one night when the king just "happens" to be unable to sleep, and needs help for his insomnia, and instead of calling for soothing music, he just "happens" to call for the reading of some boring board minutes, and in so doing discovers he had failed to reward Mordecai properly.

And the king just "happens" to discover this oversight but hours before Mordecai was to be killed by one of the king's trusted court officials, Haman. But before Haman succeeds, his murderous plot just "happens" to backfire when his wicked intent is exposed to the king by Esther. And the king orders Haman's execution on the very gallows he built for Mordecai, then promotes Mordecai to the number two position in the nation, and the Jewish people avoid a holocaust.

It all just "happened," right? Just like you just "happened" to be here this morning, listening to God's Word. Just like my father just "happened" to receive a job transfer when I was ten that resulted in our family leaving a church that didn't preach the gospel and landing in a church that did preach the gospel. Things just "happen," right?

No. God is at work fulfilling His purpose. All the time.

Dear friend, though life may seem out of control, it never is. No matter how bad it may seem, God is in control and working with a purpose in mind.

Ultimately, this purpose is the cross. What the Lord did in Esther takes His plan a step closer to the cross.

Remember the cross? If ever it seemed that God was distant, it's at the cross. Why would God allow wicked men to abuse and crucify His own Son? Why? That's the question Jesus' own followers couldn't answer on that terrible Friday. The cross didn't make sense to them...at the time. It did later.

Three days later God's plan began to make sense when Jesus left the tomb. It made even more sense forty days later when He ascended to His throne in heaven. And it will make perfect sense when He returns in glory for the Bride He redeemed, and every knee bows.

Now we know why God seemed so distant at the cross. Hear His Son. "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" God treated His Son as one forsaken. Why? Because His Son bore the sins of those who deserve to be forsaken. He took their place, and God treated Him as they deserve. And now, because His Son paid the ransom price, God forgives any sinner who will repent and believe in His Son.

Have you done so, my friend?

Please remember this. When life seems out of control, God's control that is, it's not. And if that's the case, so is truth #3...

C. Regardless of how we feel, we must choose to trust God. The hymnwriter said it well, "Trust in Him, ye saints forever. He is faithful, changing never. Neither force nor guile can sever those He loves from Him."