Westlake Church Lausanne

A Better King and a Better Story

Esther 1

We're starting a new series in the Book of Esther, which was written some 2500 years ago – so this is ancient, but it's also amazing. And if you've heard the story before you've probably heard it explained something like this: Once upon a time, in a land far away, there lived a godly, and beautiful young Jewish girl, called Esther, who became a princess and married her prince; and because she was very brave and very wise, she saved her people, and they all lived happily ever after. And if you too are godly and brave and wise, you can be as beautiful as her!

Except, that's not what this book is about. You see, if I were to ask you, what one fact you know about this book, I can almost guarantee that someone would stick their hand up and say it's the only book in the Bible where God is not mentioned. Not once.

So what is a book that doesn't mention God doing in the Bible? You see, in the book of Daniel, God is everywhere, he's all over the pages. But here, God doesn't get a single mention. Now, is that because the author got to the end and realised, 'oops, I didn't mention God!'? And the answer is, 'no!' Because there are numerous times when the author could have mentioned God, when it seems he's just about to, but he never does. And what you begin to realise is that this absence of God – far from it being a mistake – is intentional.

And so this book isn't ultimately about a pretty princess, it's about God – or rather the hiddenness of God. You see, what happens here happened some 50 years after the book of Daniel – so 50 years after the Jewish people were allowed to return to Israel from exile. But what if you didn't go back? What if you carried on living in pagan Babylon, or pagan Persia? What if you didn't want to leave and head back to the Promised Land? Would God still be for you? Could you still depend on him? Will his promises hold for you? Would he still protect you and fight for you in this pagan world?

And when God's people have all but forgotten him, and are on the verge of losing their identity and being subsumed by the surrounding culture; when they're a small, and seemingly insignificant minority; when the enemies of God are on the ascendancy, and when God seems nowhere to be seen - when God seems absent from the world, can you still trust him? Is God still at work for his purposes and his people when you just can't see him – when for page after page there's no mention of him?

And that is what makes this book so relevant for us. You see, as our societies increasingly turn their back on the God of the Bible, and we become steadily more post-Christian, where is God in such a world – in our world? And how are you supposed to live with faith and courage when God seems strangely absent?

Recently I read an article entitled 'Six Ways God's at work in you – at work'. This is how it begins:

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'You showed up to work today, but it feels like God didn't. He feels remote and absent from what you do all day long. There are temptations all around, opportunities for cutting corners. No one else cares one wit about serving God. Conversations are all banal…. You grow doubtful about yourself and wonder what it must be like for businessmen who are giants in the faith, and who sail through meetings and private work carried along by the joy of serving God. And here you stand in a job where God feels so far away.'

Does that sound familiar – when God seems hidden or far away at work? Or on campus, as the world runs in a totally different direction? Or what about in your suffering – when it can feel like he's forgotten you? Or in your sin, when it feels like your sin has finally turned him against you and he's withdrawn from you. Or when your prayers seem to go unanswered. And there are no visions, and no angelic visitations, and no miracles of deliverance like Daniel experienced – there's just silence. And life and work can leave you thinking: God are you even there? And if you are there, do you even care?

And that's what this book is about: Where is God when he seems hidden? And what we'll see is that he's all over the story, if only we have eyes to see him.

Read Esther 1.

A Strong King

Verse 1, 'Now in the days of Ahasuerus' who you might know better by his Greek name, Xerxes - Xerxes the Great, who took over the Medo-Persian Empire from his father and ruled it from 486 to 465BC. And the scale of the Persian empire was staggering. As the writer tells us in v1, 'the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia' from Asia to Africa 'over 127 provinces.'

And Ahasuerus was its king, v2, 'King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel.' In fact his official title was Shahanshah – King of Kings. And Susa – modern day Shushan in Iran, was one of four capital cities of his empire. And the citadel was his castle, his vast, fortified palace compound. So here is the most powerful, influential man on earth, reigning from his castle, sitting on his throne, impregnable, and untouchable – with everyone else beneath him. And he decides to throw a party, v3: 'In the third year of his reign' – i.e. 483BC, (he's about 35 years old) – 'he gave a feast for all his officials and servants.' And as we'll see, feasts play a crucial part in this book, and this is the first one.

And it's for his leaders and his army: v3, 'The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him.' So this man has power and authority – probably over tens of thousands of officials and soldiers.

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Now, think about the best party you've ever been to – and then forget it, because this was on a totally different scale. Firstly, it went on, we're told in v4 for '180 days'. That's 6 months! Imagine a 6-month party. After about 3 hours I'm turning to Mrs Slack and asking whether we can go home. I mean, when I was a student, it was a big deal to stay up all night, but stay up for 6 months?

And when this feast for the leaders and army is over, he holds another one: v5, 'And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days.' And it was a stunning scene. The palace gardens were transformed with curtains and hangings. And rather than gazeboes made of wood, or iron, like you and I might have, these were made of solid silver; and the fabric was the best linen dyed purple, something you could never hope to have; and you'd be walking along and go, 'look at these pillars, they're real marble, and this walk-way, this decking, it's made of mother of pearl and gemstones. And these chairs, this is gold.' And the waiter passes you a wine glass, except its not made of glass, it's solid gold. And if that wasn't good enough, you could drink from something encrusted with precious stones. And you couldn't earn in a lifetime what it costs to make one of these drinking cups – and Ahasuerus has got thousands of them.

And look what he gives them to drink: v7, 'royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king.' Now in the Slack household, we have a rule: no more than 5 franks a bottle. But not Ahasuerus: this is royal wine. And whilst normally you could only drink when the king drank, and you had to drink when the king drank, in v8 we're told, 'Drinking was according to this edict: 'there is no compulsion.' In other words, you can drink as much as you like. Now, when I was a medical student, free drinks were never a good idea. Want another drink – sure! Have some more royal wine.

But why the 6 month, 1 week party? Well, we're told in v4, 'He showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendour and pomp of his greatness.' Don't you think that's fascinating? Glory and Greatness. Can you hear the overtones of worship there? The king of kings, sitting on his throne, showcasing his glory and greatness, so his men can praise him. And yet, it's also so very modern, isn't it: it's like Instagram pre Instagram: let me show you my wealth.

But why does he do it? Why the need to flaunt it? What's his motive? Is he like some modern celebrity, desperate for others' attention or approval? No – this is about war. You see, Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian tells us that in 483BC – i.e the third year of his reign, Ahasuerus called a great war council to plan an invasion of Greece – which happened 3 years later in 480BC. And this feast is almost certainly that war council. Because think what this feast conveys: a king at the height of his powers, a king with seemingly ultimate power. And Ahasuerus puts on this display of wealth and power to persuade his people that if only they will lend him their arms, he can conquer Greece.

But this wasn't a war of survival, was it? It wasn't as if Greece was attacking him. This would be him invading them. He wants Greece. India to Ethiopia is not enough for him, he wants Athens as well. He wants to get even more territory and power and wealth. And that's the problem with money and power, isn't it? It's addictive – you never think you have enough, and you end up wanting more. He's not satisfied with ruling the greatest empire. He wants the next-door empire too. He wants every empire.

But are we so different? You see, like him, we too can be tempted to glory in our position, or success, or achievements, and we want others to see them too. And it becomes addictive, and we want even more. And in a pagan world where God seems absent, we can begin to think that our security depends on money, or power, or position, and we fall into the trap of thinking that having more is the only safe way to live.

And the reason the writer starts the book like this is because it tells us, this is the world in which the Jewish people live. And the king's glory underlines just how vulnerable God's people are, because in a world where the rich and the beautiful and the ambitious seem to have all the power, they have no power. Because where is God in such a world? Sure, the king is on his throne, but is God on his?

And today, when you see the powers of secularism, or atheism on the rise, or when you look at our popular and increasingly pluralistic cultures, it would be easy to feel powerless, and question where God is in all this.

But that's why the writer tells this – because he wants you to see how empty and false such power and authority and wealth really is. You see, if you read the king's Persian name, Ahasuerus, as a Hebrew word, it sounds like 'Headache' - King Headache. And that should tell you that things may not be quite as they appear. And the original readers would have known that 4 years later Ahasuerus would return from Greece defeated. So all this opulence, all this wealth, is not a sign of the king's might, but of its vanity. That whilst he seems to have all the power, the reality is very different.

A Weak King

Now, you ladies know this, and those of us guys with daughters know this – but a culture that objectifies women sexually is anything but healthy. You see look what happens on the seventh day of the feast, v10, 'when the heart of the king was merry with wine.' So the king's been drinking, which is never a good time to make decisions. And he calls for his seven eunuchs – for his seven castrated male servants.

Now why does a king have servants who are castrated? Because he has a harem. Because the king has a collection of the empire's most beautiful women locked away in the palace, for him to use sexually whenever he wants. So, it's not just

wealth and power that has this man's heart, sex does too. And that combination of money, sex, and power is a potent temptation to any of us, because individually and collectively, they seem to offer so much.

But look what he gets these seven eunuchs to do: v11, 'to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown.' And why does he want her to come? Does he want her wise input on some matter of state? No, v11, 'in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.'

So this man is drunk. And he's surrounded by thousands of his soldiers, who have access to free, unlimited alcohol, and he wants to parade his wife in front of them all. He wants to take his beautiful wife, and Vashti sounds like the old Persian word for beautiful woman, he wants to take Queen Beautiful, and parade her as his trophy wife, and have his men lust after her. He wants to use her, and specifically her body, to make himself look even more powerful.

So why does Vashti react as she does? Because it seems unlikely that this was anything new – I mean she already knew that she was a trophy wife, that's why she's there. So why does she refuse to come? Well, as some scholars have suggested, most likely the king is asking her to come wearing her crown, and nothing but her crown.

Now maybe you watch what's going on here and think, 'this is terrible'. But is our own culture so very different? Here Queen Vashti is objectified – but what about how our own culture objectifies women through advertising, or fashion, or clothing, or the films that we watch.

But whatever he was asking of Vashti, it must have been sufficiently awful in her eyes, she must have considered it a fate worse than death, or banishment, that she would risk death or banishment in refusing it. Verse 12, 'But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command.' So here is a woman who says 'no' to a man who had only ever heard, 'yes'. A woman who refuses a man who had only ever had what he wanted. And that's courageous. And now King Headache really does have a headache.

And verse 12 tells us, 'at this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.' As one writer says, 'all he can do is rage, but it's the rage of the powerless.' It's the rage of a man who's ego has been taken down – and maybe you know what that feels like.

You see, what does Vashti's refusal tell us about the king? What did it tell the king about himself? He's not quite as powerful as he thinks, is he. The man who rules vast swathes of the world, cannot rule his own house. The man who controls an empire, has just discovered he cannot control his wife. And he wants to persuade men to fight for him, but he can't persuade his wife to party for him.

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Now, in Daniel, we saw king after king discover that they weren't quite as powerful as they imagined, that they weren't God, that they weren't the ones with ultimate power, and in each case, they learnt that lesson by supernatural intervention – by God getting in their face. But here Ahasuerus discovers that he's not God by his wife saying 'no'. Which – let's face it guys - is how most of us discover that we're not God.

And in Daniel, God acts through dreams and visions and miraculous deliverances. But in Esther – he works through a wife saying 'no'. It's the hiddenness of God. And, sure, you may not be able to see him, but he's just humbled a proud king – and used his wife to do it. And the same is true for us: God can seem hidden and absent, until you learn to see his hand at work in the coincidences, and the triumphs, and the set-backs, and the providences of life – in its 'yesses' and its 'noes' - as he weaves his story in our lives.

And so with one little word, Vashti brings the illusion of the king's, and our, power crashing down. But the writer also sets the scene for the world Esther will enter. A world where her relationship with the king is both sexually, and politically, charged. Where she faces being a pawn in a much bigger and more dangerous game.

But for now, the king has a marital problem. So, who does he turn to? Verse 13, 'to the wise men who knew the times.' He takes it to his special advisors, to his cabinet. Now, how ironic is that? He takes an argument with his wife and escalates it, so now the government knows all about it.

And when they hear it, the officials are worried: v17-18: 'The queen's behaviour will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt… this very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behaviour will say the same to all the king's officials [i.e. to us!].' So here are the most powerful men in the world and they're worried that this very day, this little word 'no' is going to catch on, that if Vashti said it, maybe ours will too, and they're going to go on sexual strike.

And they tell the king to do two things: first, Vashti should be made an example of – she should be banished and not allowed to enter the king's presence. Which is somewhat ironic given this all started with her not wanting to enter the king's presence. And second, that an order be sent across the empire, v22, 'that every man be master in his own household.' So, the king escalated it to the government, and they successfully transform it into a problem for the whole empire! They don't want word to spread about what Vashti has done, so… they broadcast it across the empire. And the king demands empire wide what he could not enforce in his own home.

Sometimes our leaders are crazy aren't they? And the Bible tells us that we should give honour to those in power, but Esther also tells us that sometimes its

ok to laugh at them too. And we can stand in awe of the seemingly powerful and the celebrities and the cultural elite, and yet they can't even persuade their wives – or husbands - to say 'yes'. So what this episode tells us is that it's not these weak powers that ultimately decide the fate of God's people or God's purposes. It's God – even when he's hidden from view - He's the one we're to fear.

You see, why can wealth and power seem so attractive? Because we think that if we have them, or if those we sidle up to have them, we can control our destiny. But chapter one tells us – don't be taken in – look beneath the surface. Only God has that kind of power – even when you can't see him.

A Better King

Now, if you read the Bible you'll know it's full of kings, and they fall on the scale of bad to moderately ok. But none of them leave you thinking: he's the one, he's the perfect king. And nothing's changed has it? Today another politician pops up, and we think maybe he or she will do it – maybe they'll govern with integrity, maybe they'll succeed where all the others have failed. But we keep on being disappointed.

But why the disappointment? Why do we keep on hoping that this one will be better? Or, if you've become jaundiced, why the cynicism about politicians? Because, deep down, we're looking for that perfect king. We're looking for a king who won't use power for his own ends, who won't fill his pockets at his citizen's expense, who won't be corrupted by money, sex and power.

And the Bible tells us that Jesus is that king we're all looking for. A much better king of kings than Ahasuerus. And here we see Ahasuerus sitting on his throne, safe in his castle, showing off his wealth to his poor subjects. But Christ left his throne, and he left the safety of his castle, and he became poor so his subjects might become rich. And he's a much better husband than Ahasuerus. He doesn't objectify his bride, he cherishes her. He doesn't expose his bride, his people, us, to shame, he covers our shame. He's a king, and a husband, who doesn't banish us from his presence, but one who brings us, the banished, in. A king who doesn't throw a drunken party, but instead invites us to a feast at his table. A king who rules over an empire far greater than Ahasuerus, but who rules in love, not fear. The only king who can handle ultimate power.

And when you know his love for you – you won't say 'no' as Vashti did, you'll say 'yes' to whatever he calls you to do. And when he entrusts you with power and wealth, you won't abuse it or grab more of it, or try to control others, like these men did, instead you'll walk in the footsteps of a much better king. The king who came to serve, not to be served.