

He Has Seated Us in the Heavenly Places in Christ Jesus

Esther

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Bible Text: Esther 1; Ephesians 2:1-10

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I'd like us this morning to begin a study in the book of Esther. The book of Esther may be somewhat familiar to you. I believe there was a movie made about it not so long ago. I confess I haven't actually seen it but I'm reliably informed that there was such a movie but our purpose this morning is not to engage in a critique of a movie made by men but of a study of the word written by God.

But even as we begin to examine the book of Esther, there's an unusual aspect to this book. We need to look at some of the characters but the chief character is not actually named in this book, perhaps that might even seem strange to you. How is it possible that the main character doesn't even get a mention? That would seem to fly in the face of common sense. Any other novel that you might read or any other book, how can the main character be absent from the story? Was it an oversight of the author? Well, the person of whom I'm speaking is God himself.

As we open up our Bibles, we read the very first verse of Scripture, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." In the very opening verse, we see that God is, as it were, setting himself before us that he is the sovereign Creator. He has but to speak the word and the word itself is brought into being. And from Genesis to Revelation, it is God's word to us to instruct us and to encourage us, to challenge us, sometimes to rebuke us. The fact that we have here in the middle of our Scriptures a book which doesn't even mention him is strange. There's only one other book that is similar to that, the book of Solomon; the Song of Solomon does not mention the name of God either.

Well, was it an oversight on the part of the author of the book of Esther? Possibly it was Mordechai himself who wrote this book although that is uncertain; that's really no more than speculation. Did he forget to mention God? I really don't think that that is an explanation. Far from anything else, this is God's word. The fact that the author doesn't mention him can hardly be just a pure oversight, "Oh, if only we had thought about that sooner, I'd have slipped in some references to God." Rather I would have us see that in reading through the book of Esther, what we have here is God presented to us in a way which we can really identify with day-by-day. It's not always so obvious to the human eye when God is at work but that doesn't mean to say that because God is not in every

conversation or depicted or presented to us in every report in our news programs that God isn't behind the scenes, that he isn't the one who is in sovereign control.

So far from the fact that God is not mentioned in the book being an oversight, I think there is actually a lesson in the very fact that God is not mentioned, that as we examine, as it were, the events which guide and direct our lives or the lives of great nations, that we should constantly be asking ourselves, "What is God doing at work behind the scenes not mentioned in an obvious, overt fashion but is there nonetheless?" And as we make our way through this book, I trust that we'll see again and again God's providential ordering of events that leads and guides and disposes all matters and events that are set before us in the pages of Scripture to show us that nothing happens by chance; this is not mere coincidence here but God working out his purposes.

It puts us in mind surely of the story of Joseph, perhaps familiar to you whether or not from Scripture or perhaps the musical that bears his name in the title. Well, not written by God-fearing men but the story is at least familiar to us as one of the 12 sons of Jacob, being rather too big for his own boots, as we might say. A proud young man in many ways. He thought he was his father's favorite until, of course, he was threatened with death by his own brothers and they thought, "Well, why kill him when we can make a profit out of him?" He is sold into slavery in Egypt. You know that story, or are at least somewhat familiar with it perhaps but what is it that Joseph says at the very end? "You meant it for ill but God meant it for good." That's a truth in Scripture that comes out again and again. The enemies of God's people may often rise up as they do as we'll see in this book to destroy if they possibly can God's people but they will be thwarted. Why? Because God is the one who is ultimately in control.

God is at work even when he hides himself from view. Even though God's name is not mentioned in this book, the eye of faith sees clearly that God is the one who is orchestrating events and behind the scenes. All along in every chapter, God is working out his perfect plans and purposes. The theme of the book: preservation, providence and punishment. The threat of the book is to trust in God's providence, that God is working out his plans. As we sometimes sing,

"Deep in unfathomable mines,
Of never-failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will.

"Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy, and shall break
In blessings on your head."

So the main character depicted for us in this book is God himself even though he doesn't get a mention. Of course, a significant person mentioned in the book is the person who has given her name to this book. There are only 2 books in Scripture that bear women's

names: there's this and the book of Ruth. Here we have presented to us Esther. Now, Esther hasn't made an appearance as yet. What we have in the first chapter is a setting of the scene but she will be introduced to us. Apparently she is an orphan looked after by a family member, Mordechai. She's an orphan and don't be offended by this but she's a woman. Now, we have perhaps a somewhat different attitude towards these things but remember that we're not living in the society in which Esther lived. This is long, long ago, 2,500 years or thereabouts, near enough and to be an orphan and a woman put you in a very vulnerable position. I don't think that element is incidental to the story itself. She stands, as it were, something of a depiction; she embodies, as it were, the children of Israel who are in a vulnerable position. And as we make our way through the book, we'll discover the plots that are hatched to destroy them, to wipe them off the face of the earth.

Well, Esther is presented to us when she makes an appearance in the pages of Scripture as being the orphan girl who is vulnerable. Her parents have been removed from the earth and she needs someone else to look after her. Bear that in mind as we contemplate what God is doing. Sometimes God shows himself to be powerful by taking the weak. God chooses the weak to confound the strong. God chooses the foolish to confound the wise. But not everything goes smoothly. Sometimes we find ourselves, as Esther did, as strangers living in a strange land. We live among hostile forces. Not everyone will be sympathetic towards either God or his people. There is something of an irrational hatred for the things of God demonstrated so often by the people of this world.

Not many minutes ago as we prayed, we gave thanks for the safe return of our young people from Key West. I wish I could give you a fuller report but let me just give you an illustration of this hatred that is amongst the people of this world as Pastor W. preached the Gospel. He preached a simple straightforward message. He preached the law. He talked about how we are all sinners and that God is just and being just and holy he cannot ignore sin but that God is also a God of love and provides his own Son that whoever should trust in him, whoever believes the Lord Jesus Christ shall not perish but have everlasting life. Well, as the crowd gathered on Mallory Square, sometimes 20, sometimes 60 people to hear the presentation of the Gospel and on one occasion earlier, just a few days ago, there was somebody in the crowd on vacation and he shouts out, "You can't prove that! You can't prove that!" He was starting to heckle the preacher of God's word from the crowd.

Now, just stop and think about that for a moment. If you've ever been in a lecture theater perhaps at college or being in school just getting your history lesson, boys and girls, count yourselves fortunate when you do American history. It usually only goes back about 3 or 400 years. You know, when I went to school, we had 2,000 years. It started with Julius Caesar invading, the United Kingdom now, invading Britain 55 BC and you have to go from 55 BC up to the present. It went on forever. It took about 2,000 years to get through it. Just imagine the preacher is up there in front of the class and says, "Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC," and then somebody from the class cries, "You can't prove that!" Well, how did the teacher know about it? Well, it's in the history books. "Yeah, but they were just written by men. You can't prove that."

Why would somebody heckle a preacher for saying, "You can't prove that Jesus rose from the dead"? Nobody would heckle a history teacher for saying, "Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC." Why does a person heckle? Because he hates the message. He doesn't want to hear that. Pastor W. said, "What is the historical record?" It's very clear. "He appeared to the disciples. He appeared to this individual. He appeared to about 500 people at one time, most of whom are still alive. I am setting before you in my letter," he says to the Corinthian church, "most of them are still alive. Go and check my facts." What does Luke say, as he opens up the Gospel, "I have done my very best to check all the facts. This is historical record. You can go and check that these have all been verified that Jesus Christ rose from the dead." Far more testimony to the fact that Jesus rose from the dead than there is to the fact that Julius Caesar invaded Britain in 55 BC. But nobody heckles a history teacher saying, "You can't prove that!" There is an inbuilt antagonism towards God and the people of God. Why? Because the natural man is at enmity with God and they show it in the way in which they respond to the Gospel.

Well, I happened to ask the heckler afterwards what he thought would happen after he died. He said, "Nothing at all. That's the end." To which I said, "You can't prove that." He was willing to base his eternity on something he could not prove and he was willing to heckle someone who gave the answer from God's word. "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved."

From Esther we turn to some of the other main characters that are in the book that bears her name. What about Ahasuerus and Vashti? What have they to do with us? What have they to do indeed with Jesus for that matter? Now, at the time the people of God were, it says Esther is presented to us and they are in exile some 60 years since Babylon had taken the captors off into captivity. Cyrus had issued a proclamation in 539 BC, just not that long before these events to allow some Jews to return but most didn't. But as you can identify a little bit with that, imagine and this may not be just too far off the mark for some present. A member of your family who came from let's say a well-known European country to the shores of the United States, let's say for argument's sake, the Netherlands, in the 1950s and now King Willem Alexander, the King of the Netherlands says, "We want you back. Come on back," and you say, "I'm on my way." Well, probably a lot of... "1953 was like a long time ago. It's not me that came, it was my father or my grandfather that came so long ago. We're settled here. We found this is a land of milk and honey. We're settled here. We don't want to go back." And so it was for many of those who had gone off into exile. If you'd asked them the week after they'd arrived in exile they would have got the next train back from Susa, back to Jerusalem, but well, 60 years later on, not everybody wanted to go. They had become quite settled.

Well, as we ponder these things, this is not just merely a history book which may or may not interest you. You may be interested and fascinated by history. You may think it's all...well, what is history? It's just one thing after another, isn't it after all? So what's the interest in the history? Well, we're always saying, "I'm reading it and I'm wanting Jesus to show me Christ in all the Scriptures. The road to Emmaus experience." We don't just read it as a history book and not thinking, "Well, what is Jesus telling us through his words?" or I'm not going to get any benefit from this particular book.

You see, God sets before us in his word the various pictures. We have a husband and wife which most of us here are somewhat familiar with, the relationship between a man and a woman, husband and wife. What did Paul say in the book of Ephesians? He says, "The relationship between a husband and wife is like a picture to us of the relationship between Christ and his church." How are you to understand the relationship between Christ and his church is by understanding something that is familiar to us, a husband and wife. Or the relationship within a family, father and son, whether there's a relationship there between father and son. It's not for nothing that we refer to our heavenly Father; it's not for nothing that we refer to Jesus Christ as his only Son. We take what is familiar to us and that helps us to understand something about what God is showing about himself.

So it is as we deal with the issue of King Ahasuerus and as we are presented in that opening chapter, it's the setting of the scene of the book of Esther. We see here is a king who has dominion. It's spread before us in terms which are easy for us to understand. Now we're turning from a lesson in history and we're turning to a lesson in geography and we're told that he ruled from India right across the Middle East right down into Ethiopia. That's a considerable part of the world. He was a powerful man. One of the ancient historians, a man called Herodotus, calculated that his army was about 2 ¼ million men strong which sounds a bit unrealistic, to be honest, and many people have doubted that. It would be like President Obama fielding an army of about 150 million soldiers, a tad unrealistic perhaps but it was a statement of his power and his authority.

He had a royal throne and in the midst of that with all his surrounding dignitaries with his impressive army, his impressive throne, he throws this magnificent banquet. It's not just that he's having a few friends around for some sort of Middle Eastern barbecue, this is on a lavish scale. In other words, he's demonstrating his power, his authority, his majesty. He's demonstrating his exceeding great wealth and he's able to entertain such a large crowd for not just one evening but for 180 days. This goes on for six months and how do you celebrate the end of a six month festival with eating and drinking and so forth? Well, then you just throw another party for your intimate friends and that lasts a week because that's kind of just a few hundred of your closest friends that gather around for another banquet.

Now, what are we to understand in this opening chapter of the book of Esther? We're being told about a king who has exceeding broad lands; the most important and most powerful man of his generation. A man of exceeding great wealth. A man who reigns over 127 provinces right the way from India right across to Ethiopia who is able to entertain vast crowds for month after month after month. A man who you are allowed just a peek into his royal palaces which are spread with mother-of-pearl and porphyry and marble pillars and white and purple linens, the colors of Imperial rule. He displays his wealth and his bounty, his authority and his royal titles. He's a man of exceeding great power and privilege.

But even here, you see, there is an exaggeration of the titles; it's very often the case. After I'd been going through the history of the British Isles for about 1,500 years, we got to the

point that the kings of England had this title "Kings of France." There was some obscure reason for it. I'm not going to bother you with it. Edward III claimed to be King of France. The King of England or Queen maintained that title "King of France" right up until the 19th century after the time of the French Revolution. They didn't even have a king and the King of England was still saying, "I'm King of France." Go figure. Why do I draw attention to that? It's because men even though they have great authority and quite clearly Ahasuerus did, they still want more. They want to exaggerate whatever they've got so the kings of England from 1340-1801 styled themselves the "Kings of France" even though it was a complete and utter fiction. Well, Ahasuerus was not immune to these sorts of vanities either. King Ahasuerus claimed all sorts of titles for himself including King of kings and that alone should give us pause.

So these are characters that we're going to be dealing with back in the world of men as we deal with what actually prompted the events of the book then brings to our attention. There is a little bit of a snowball effect of a lack of wisdom, first of all, on the part of King Ahasuerus. We're told there, "On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine." Well, there's a kind of a code in there for us. The heart of the king was merry with wine. He had had too much alcohol. Now, my native land is known for excessive drinking. If you'll go to an almanac, you'll find that there are something like 17 different ways to say a man is drunk. We don't say that outright, we say, "He is well refreshed." Such are the euphemisms. People don't get falling over, no, "Wee Hamish, he was well refreshed, you understand."

Well, that was King Ahasuerus. He'd had too much to drink, rather too merry and what happens as a result? Learn from this: when you get too intoxicated, the mind does not make good decisions. He makes a bad decision. He sends for Vashti, his queen, and he demands that she come before him and the assembled crowd. Why? Well, we don't have to guess, we're told in verse 11, "To bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to show the peoples and the princes her duty for she was lovely to look at." What was going on there? Well, you've got the king who is apparently somewhat better refreshed than he ought to have been and he says to his people, "My wife, she is just wonderful. Send for Queen Vashti. Send for her because she's a real good looker." What is happening here? You have basically a bunch of drunken men, men and women are being housed and fed separately, you've got a bunch of drunken men at the end of a 7 day party and the king is saying, "Bring Queen Vashti so you can all gawk at her." It was a bad decision. A bad decision.

When you throw a rock into a placid pool, what happens? The ripples go out so what happens? Vashti refuses to come. Another bad decision. Why was it a bad decision? Because this was no ordinary gathering of friends. This was a bringing together of the important people of the realm. These were the movers and shakers in the capital and now Vashti had deliberately ignored the explicit command of the king. In the book of Daniel we're told about when Nebuchadnezzar raises up a whacking great statue so that men and women and everyone should bow down. It must have been quite an affair. I mean, they had this huge orchestra. When the lyre, the timbrel and the bagpipes all start up, then everyone is to bow down before the statue. Nebuchadnezzar invested so much of his

personal prestige so that anybody that stood against that was not going to fare well. Of course, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego get cast into the fiery furnace as a result. Well, Ahasuerus was doing something similar here. He cannot afford to lose face before his courtiers.

So things just got worse. He turns to his seven wise men. They were sort of the cabinet. There is the Secretary of State. There is the secretary for the military. There is the home defense guy and whoever else, Secretary of the Treasury. He's got 7 members of the cabinet here and he addresses them and says, "Well, what are we going to do?" Now, Herodotus helps us here again to understand something of the nature of King Ahasuerus because his opinion was the opinion of the last person that he spoke to. We see that somewhat fulfilled in the word of God. "Well, what do you think I ought to do?" he said. "Well, you can't let Vashti get away with it." "Why not?" "Well, if Vashti gets away with it, our wives will get away with it." Who are they thinking about? They're thinking about their own prestige. They don't want to go home and hear, "Well, if Vashti can get away with it, you can cook your own supper tonight." No, no, no, we can't have this so the result is that Vashti is deposed. They were thinking of their own interests as is so often the case. Those who can't achieve it themselves want to legislate for what other people ought to do.

So they said, "We've got to have our wives respect us," and King Ahasuerus by the laws of the Medes and the Persians sent out a decree that wives must respect and do what their husbands tell them to do and get rid of Vashti. Get rid of Vashti. No mention of King Ahasuerus. He was a bit of an idiot. He brought this upon himself. What about repentance? What about somebody like Nathan who is bold enough to go up to David and say, "Thou art the man. You've got it wrong here. You've got it wrong." Well, we follow after the ways of the world and we think along the way the world thinks. We're not surprised if things start to unravel. They unravel for Ahasuerus, they unravel for Vashti and we are expecting things to unravel for ourselves. And what is it that the counselors are suggesting to Ahasuerus butt basically, "You'd better do this otherwise society itself will come unglued. So let's make a law to say you can't become unglued." They are whistling in the wind.

Well, there's a major lesson that's coming to us surely from this: put not your trust in kings or in princes. Put not your trust in kings or in princes. You know, there's a temptation which I think we probably all face that if we had just a little bit more, if we won the lottery or suddenly we just came home and found a suitcase full of cash that our lives would be immeasurably improved and we could do all sorts of wonderful things with that like pay off the mortgage, pay off the car note, send our kids to college and everything would be just great and all it would take is just a suitcase full of cash. But this is actually from the devil. The enemy of our souls wants you to believe that if you just had more of the resources of this world everything would be just fine. There's a parallel to that, isn't there? If we just had the right people in the Oval Office. If we had the right counselors, well then, everything would be just fine, wouldn't it? Well, no it wouldn't be just fine. Why not? Because the person who occupies the Oval Office is still a man. He

makes foolish decisions. Ahasuerus had all the power that man could ever possibly want and it didn't stop him from drinking too much and making a stupid decision.

So where do we place our trust? If we cannot look to the most powerful man upon the face of the earth as surely Ahasuerus stands before us as an example of a person who had reached the very apex, the summit of human authority and power, if we can't place our trust in him, who can we place our trust in? Well surely, even in the opening chapter we're beginning to see that placing our trust in and our confidence in man is only ever going to result in disappointment. It doesn't matter how hard you campaign for this representative or that Senator or that particular president. It's not that president who is going to sort everything out for you and everything will suddenly become wonderful no more than that suitcase full of cash is going to transform your life and you're never going to have any problem. It's a deception from the pit of hell. Put not your trust in kings or in princes.

So the unspoken chief character even in the opening chapter of Esther is God himself. It's not going to be Ahasuerus who does the right thing. He's not presented to us, he's presented to us as a weak and fallible man for all his power. And it may be that Ahasuerus styled himself the King of kings but it was a title to which he was not entitled. There is only one King of kings and that's the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the one that has ultimate authority. He holds dominion. He has a throne and it's to that throne that we address ourselves. For those who are outside of Christ, they will experience one day sooner or later that the throne is the throne of judgment. But there is a wonderful title that is given to those who believe and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ that that throne is turned into the throne of grace. We use it frequently. Now, perhaps we might even say we use it just about every Sunday, "Let's go before the throne of grace." It may even have been used by the elder who led us in prayer this morning. It's a term that we use which ultimately is to us, those who are believers, the throne of grace. It might surprise you to learn that it only appears once in the whole of Scripture in Hebrews. But for those who bend the knee to the King of kings, that judgment seat is now turned into the throne of grace. It's where grace reigns supreme. The King of kings is a gracious king and will be gracious to all those who come to him.

Now, at the beginning of our worship before we had the call to worship, in fact, I read to you from our book of worship in preparation for coming to the Lord's table. Perhaps as you prepare to come to the Lord's table in a week's time you might remember the banquet that King Ahasuerus set before his nobles, his counselors, 180 days for the general population and 7 days for his intimate friends and people from whom he took advice, those who saw his face, his intimates. But not the richest banquet that King Ahasuerus could provide for his citizens, for his subjects, begins to compare with that which God spreads before his people. We come to the Lord's table and there are gifts for God's people with which this world not only has nothing to compare, has no understanding. The body that was broken. The blood that was shed. We come not as those who are put in fear of our lives to enter into the presence of the King as we will see that Esther is later on in the story but as those who are commanded to enter into the presence of the King of kings

because he has spread a banquet that this world cannot duplicate before them. But those who trust in the Lord Jesus Christ will have eternal life.

Of course, King Ahasuerus wanted to display the wonders of his wealth, the bounty that was his but the best that a man can do does not begin to compare with what the King of kings, the true King of kings can do and that's what we read of in Ephesians 2. The contrast could not be greater. Those who were dead in their trespasses and sins now through the grace and the mercy of the Lord Jesus Christ are quickened and made to sit together in the heavenly places. What an honor it would have been for the cabinet of 7 to sit at table with King Ahasuerus but greater by far, infinitely greater, is the privilege of those who know and trust the Lord Jesus Christ, that have heard the voice calling us to him that we might sit with him in the heavenly realms for all authority is given to him. The royal titles are not fictions set before us to impress foolish men. They are there in their fullness for he alone is the King of kings.

"Join all the glorious names,
The wisdom, love and power,
That ever mortals knew,
That angels ever bore:
All are too poor to speak His worth,
Too poor to set my Savior forth."

Let's pray.

Our greatest God and our heavenly Father, we do thank thee for this book and we pray that as we read through it, mediate upon it, reflect upon it, that thy word may be brought home by thy Spirit to our hearts. That we would not put our trust in kings or in princes of this world, no matter the promises for how often have we been disappointed by the promises of the politicians in seeking election only to be jaded by their foolishness when achieving office. But we thank thee, Father, that this day as we bow heart and head in thy presence there are confidences not in the arm of flesh but in the one who is truly the King of kings, the one who is victor even over death and the grave, the one who has ascended to thy right hand and reigns supreme.

We ask, Father, that those who have entered into this place content in their own righteousness may have that contentment shattered, that the foolishness of trusting the things of this world may be stripped away from them, that the foolishness of the rich young ruler as he proclaimed that, "All these things I have kept from my youth," that these things would be stripped away from us also that we may set aside the false gods, the confidence in the flesh, in our own strength, in our own wisdom, confidence in our leaders, confidence in our wealth and our ability to do things. Set them all aside, Father, and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and in him alone for our salvation.

Hear our prayer, O God. We pray that we may see that which is hidden from the view of men, that which was hidden from the view of King Ahasuerus, from Haman and the like, that thou has pulled aside the veil that would hide from the view of men the working of

our sovereign God. So bless thy word, we pray. Forgive us our sins for these things we'd ask in Jesus' name, for his sake. Amen.