

# The Emperor Strikes Back

*Esther*

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**Bible Text:** Esther 1, Ephesians 5  
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Well, do keep your Bibles open there. We're going to look at all of this chapter as we unfold this morning. We, for the sake of visitors, have just finished a series of studies on the book of Isaiah that took us over about 82 Sundays, so now for something completely different. From Isaiah's exalted theological heights in which the attributes of God are spelled out in monumental detail in which our hearts were lifted up to the heavens in terms of grasping some of the great and wonderful insights into the being of God, we come to the book of Esther in which he isn't even mentioned. In fact, I did wonder whether I should preach the book without mentioning God. That would be an interesting exercise. I think I'd get fire, actually. I think the elders would have something to say if I did that and rightly so. But what are we to make of this book? We look at this book and we're confronted with this problem. Imagine living where your God is invisible and silent. Imagine living where your God is invisible or silent. Well, some of you say, "Actually, that's not as hard to imagine as you think. In the office I work in, God is invisible and silent. Nobody talks about him. Nobody ever refers to him except perhaps by way of an oath, a curse. God is never consulted. There are no natural conversations in which God is the subject. He might as well be absent in my work place." Maybe you're thinking that. Maybe in the home that you live in, you're the only believer and therefore in your home God is absent. You identify immediately with this particular book.

And this book raises a whole series of questions that very often come crowding into our minds. We are sometimes confronted by these hard questions, "Where is God when such and such happens? Why doesn't God do something?" I mean, the time of the Exodus was a time to live. There was a period in which God seemed to be doing something every trick and turn. He was there in a burning bush. And then he's there with Moses as he stands before Pharaoh and there are all these plagues. And then he's there opening up the Dead Sea. He's there getting water from the rock. He's there leading them through the wilderness with a great cloud of smoke and fire. He's there giving them manna in the morning. The book of Exodus is full of God doing things, but in the book of Esther, there is no God mentioned. No God mentioned. What are we going to do with this?

Well, one thing we're going to do is we're to remind ourselves that it's in the Bible and therefore it fits into the Bible's big story. So what is the Bible's big story? Well, let me summarize it like this: first of all, it's a story about God. Primarily, isn't it, it's a story of

God. This is the God, for example, that we hear speaking in Isaiah 40. We heard him speaking in Isaiah 40 when he says to everybody who will listen, "To whom then will you compare me that I should be like him?" says the Holy One. He asks people to lift up their eyes on high and to see who created? "Look at the stars, look at the galaxies, look at the sheer enormity of the universe, who created all these things?" God says. And the answer is, "I did." He brought them all out by number. He calls them all by name, by the greatness of his might, and because he is strong in power, not one of them is missing. Our God is immense. He is incontrovertible. He is incomprehensible. He is there. He is invisible but he is great in power. We can overcome him. The Bible is the story about God.

Secondly, the Bible is the story about human resistance to God. In the second Psalm, we read about this when it says this, "Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Messiah, saying, "Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us." The Bible is the story of human rebellion and resistance against God.

But thirdly, the Bible is the story of God's purpose for us in Jesus Christ. Here's how the Apostle Paul puts it in Ephesians 1, he talks about the purpose, the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." There is God's big purpose. It has to do with Jesus the Messiah; it has to do with bringing everything, filling everything, bringing everything to the completion that is to be found in Jesus Christ.

And one last thing, the Bible story is the story of God overruling human plans and schemes to further his purposes and accomplish his will, and we're going to see that that will happen in this book, the book of Esther for the lesson of this book is this: the presence of absence does not mean the absence of presence. The presence of absence does not mean the absence of presence.

When you read the opening chapter of the book, you find a whole list of names. I spare Jerry the embarrassment of having to read some of these names. He got Ahasuerus wrong, dear know what he would have done with all the rest of them, but there's a whole host of names if you glance down there to verse 10, for example, and then further on in verse 14. There is a whole catalog of names, main characters, Ahasuerus and then this first chapter, she gets a walk on, she doesn't get a walk on part, but she's being quoted, Queen Vashti, and there are all these other characters as well. God isn't on the contents of the drama at all. You would think he doesn't even get a walk on part in this story and yet I want to say to you as we shall see, he's no extra. The only dramatic place that I ever got was that a great Christian endeavor convention when I was a boy and I made my dramatic debut. It was my debut and my last show actually all at once. I had the great honor of being one of the crowd who rushed on crying, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" Exit, stage left. That was it. Over in a moment of time. Well, God gets more than that kind of entrance in this book. Although he is never mentioned, he is the chief character. In the story he is not only the chief actor, he is the author, director, as well as the principle

character in the story. Here is a lesson then: God is nowhere mentioned but he is everywhere present in this story.

Well then, let's move to this opening chapter. This is the setting of the scene. We come into the drama, the curtain is opened and here we find ourselves observing the great banqueting chamber of the king of Persia and what a great kind he is. As we come to these opening credits here in verse 1, we have him named, Ahasuerus. I went down and spoke to the children earlier on and I said that I was talking on the book of Esther and could anyone name the king, and someone put their hand up and said, "Xerxes," and they were right, of course, because that's his other name. Xerxes is another name of his, the Greek name Ahasuerus is the name that is used here.

And what a kingdom he had. An enormous kingdom. We have described there in verse 1, "from India to Ethiopia." Now, I realize, of course, that I am with an American audience and we've been well versed or schooled when we come to America not to take for granted that you know where any of these other countries are, after all, you have no need to interest in them. So let me just be clear that India and Ethiopia are not in Europe, okay? They are somewhere else and it's a big area that's being covered here from central Asia to nearly central Africa. An enormous area covered by this Medo-Persian empire, 127 provinces are represented at this great feast and here is King Ahasuerus sitting on his royal throne. The author, by the way, of this book of Esther, is writing a political satire so you must be prepared, Presbyterian though you may be, to smile regularly as we go through this book. He wants you to and so he's building up this case. You are to be impressed by this man Ahasuerus. There he is reigning over this grand area from India to Ethiopia with 127 provinces, sitting on his royal throne in Susa, one of the four great capital cities that he used. He would go from one to the other. Here he is at Susa. It's the third year of his reign and he's giving this great feast for all his officials.

Here's my first point: the emperor struts his stuff. That's what he's doing here as he gathers all his officials and servants. The army of Media and Persia, the nobles, the governors of the provinces, he brings them all before him. He's bringing all the great, all the good, all the movers and shakers of his vast empire, he's bringing them together in one place so that they can see how many of them there are and so that all of them can see how big a guy he is. He is the boss. He is the ruler. He is the great emperor of this whole shebang. What a great guy Ahasuerus is.

A few years ago, Simon and Garfunkel sang about Richard Cory.

"They say that Richard Cory owns one half of this whole town,  
With political connections to spread his wealth around.  
Born into society, a banker's only child,  
He had everything a man could want: power, grace, and style.

"The papers print his picture almost everywhere he goes:  
Richard Cory at the opera, Richard Cory at the shows.  
And the rumor of his parties and the orgies on his yacht!

Oh, he must be very happy with everything he's got."

Well, Richard Cory had nothing on Ahasuerus. Verses 1 to 3 tell us he had almost limitless power. He is the supreme ruler of the superpower of his day. He doesn't just get to make presidential orders or whatever they are, this man actually, his word is law in absolutely every area of his empire.

Verses 4 to 8 emphasize the vast possessions that he has. As he draws in his lieutenants and his princes and his nobles and shows off the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of the greatness of his achievements, he shows it off for 120 days. The author as he recounts this list, is smiling to himself as he's imagining us listening to this list and being impressed by this great person. And when the feast is over for the army and the nobles, he has another feast in the garden this time for the common citizenry of Susa. It lasts only a week. If you look at verse 6, the Hebrew is unusual here. One commentator tries to capture something of the sense of it when he paraphrases it like this, "Oh. Oh." Isn't that a dramatic "oh"? "Oh, the white cotton curtains, the violet hangings! Oh, the couches of gold and silver and the mosaic pavement of porphyry and marble and mother-of-pearl!" My mother would say, "That's nonsense there." But anyway, "Oh, the grandeur, the glory, the opulence of it all!" You're meant to be stunned. You're meant to be left breathless. You're meant to remain speechless as you walk in and are overwhelmed by the glory. These ordinary people who lived in Susa on a pittance going into the royal palace and seeing all this, you can imagine the impact on them.

Verses 7 and 8 tell us what this party was like. It was some party, let me tell you. Ahasuerus declares an edict. Now, understand in the Medo-Persian empire, if you pronounced an edict, it was one of the laws of the Medes and the Persians it cannot be broken. When there was an edict of the emperor, you did it or else. Here's his edict. Listen to this, when it comes to drinking, "There is no compulsion." What that means, being translated means, "Don't hold back in the presence of the Emperor. Drink until you can drink no more," is what it's saying. It's a law. He's putting it into order that when you're there with him, no restraint will be tolerated. You see, he was used to making these kind of edicts. That's what people in this kind of powerful empire do, they just make edict after edict, telling people in their ordinary lives what they can and cannot do.

I can illustrate this, actually, because the country where I used to live used to be part of a vast empire just like this...until the other day. I don't talk politics from the pulpit, at least not the politics of America, so I'm okay here. But when they were in this vast empire which is going to fall apart apparently now, there was this kind of same mentality as Ahasuerus has. Let me read to you from EU law, that is European Union law, number 2257/94. It's about bananas. Quote, "Bananas must be free from malformation or abnormal curvature of the fingers. They must have a minimum length of 14 cm." The background to this is that there are some people in Europe, the Germans, seriously, there are lots of them here, who do not like curved bananas. They want long straight bananas. Now, you can't even get them here. I've noticed no long straight bananas in America since I've been here because you're liberated from this kind of detail, but I'm really quite sure that someone will bring it up to Congress at some point. Long, straight bananas like

this. Seriously, because they didn't like curved ones so the curved ones got binned, trashed, thrown away. When the UK entered the European Union, it had been used to getting its bananas from its colonies out there in the Caribbean and all their bananas, I'm afraid, were curved so we stopped trading with our own colonies and lost them a lot of work, a lot of jobs and stuff when we went into this EU thing, from which now they are liberated. But anyway, it's all about control. All those bureaucrats keep on making up all these rules because it's all about control and that was the way it was with Ahasuerus, it was all about control. The emperor struts his stuff.

Secondly, the emperor hits a snag. As the scene unfolds, it's as though our author is setting Ahasuerus up in order to prick and burst the bubble of his pride. There he is, I want you to look at verse 10. "On the seventh day," remember, the background is the drinking; the drinking is according to his edict; there is no compulsion. "On the seventh day when the heart of the king was merry with wine," in other words, when he was blitzed, "he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas," please, don't use any of those names when it comes to bringing your grandchildren to be baptized here. These were "the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus." He sends them "to bring Queen Vashti before him with her royal crown." Why did he do that? Keep reading, "in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at."

So what's in his mind?

"They have seen my royal palace,  
They have seen my royal robes.  
They have seen my royal throne,  
And they've enjoyed my royal clothes.  
They've drunk my royal wine,  
They've come in here to dine.  
How else can I impress them?  
I'll show them who is mine."

By the way, I just did that poetry just off the top of my head right there. Ah, there you go. So what he wants to do is he wants to impress them now with who he's married to, this woman. The whole emphasis, by the way, is on what the woman looks like. By the way, that is the litmus test of how shallow a man is. If that's all he can say about the woman in his life is that she looks good, then you know, 1. he doesn't know here because we're going to find out that, in fact, Ahasuerus does not even know this girl. He does not know her. All he sees is how she looks and he regards her as just another one of the possessions just like those couches of gold and silver and those golden vessels and vessels of different kinds in which the royal wine was served. She is just one of those to him. That's all. You cannot get any further away from the description that you find in Ephesians of how a husband should view his wife; of how a husband should care for his wife; and of the spirit in which a husband should look after his wife. This man was not loving her with a sacrificial, servant-hearted spirit like the Lord Jesus loves the church. No. She was a trophy wife and he loved it when he went to parties and she was on his arm and every eye

turned and looked at her and thought, "He must be some guy." That's what he wanted. But more than that, he wanted to show her off to a room full of drunken slob who had been drinking nonstop since they had come to the party.

So here's the snag: he sends his heavies to go and bring her in and Vashti says, "No." From India down to Ethiopia, in 127 provinces with princes and lieutenants and governors and armies of Media and Persia, and palaces and royal robes and wine that doesn't ever seem to run out and food in abundance, everything at his bidding, at his calling, and a girl says, "No." And the author wants you to say, "Yes!" Because we have an insight, don't we, into the nature of earthly power and human self-importance. It will come from somewhere and it will be blown out of the water.

Now, there has been a whole literature written about what Vashti was thinking. You have those who are obviously reading the present back into the past, was she a proto-feminist. Others think she came from a more noble family than her husband did. Others think that in fact when he called her to wear her royal crown, that was the only thing she was to be wearing. We don't know. Actually we don't know, but we do know this: he did not know her. He did not know her. She was his wife, he had never taken the time to notice that she had grown a character; that she had backbone; that she had courage; and that being called on, summoned in front of everybody to come and strut her stuff in front of all these leering drunken men was an assault on her dignity as queen, but on her dignity as a woman. It was an abuse of power. It was an absolute disgrace, and she had the courage to say, "No," not only to her husband but also to the king and she did the right thing. She did the right thing.

You know, in the New Testament when it is describing marriage, we have this great image of Christian marriage in Ephesians 5 and there are two commands in that word that Paul gives, one of them is addressed to the ladies. So, men, when you want to talk about marriage, please don't talk about the subject there to talk about. It's to the women that Paul says, "Submit yourself to your own husband." He first of all addresses the husbands and he says to the husbands, "Love your wives like Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her." Gave himself up for her. That is, he gave himself up for her. He sacrificed for her. He laid down his life for her. He died for her. And you won't die for your golf. You won't die for your football. You won't die for your ice hockey. You won't die for your me time. You won't take the time to get to know that girl who married you with your pleas of love ringing in her ear only to find that in the end, all you wanted was her for yourself as a possession and not as an object of your self-sacrificing, ongoing, never-dying love. That you had no desire to do what Christ does for his church; no desire to bring out of her the talents and the gifts that God had given to her and encourage her to be all that she could be; encourage her to learn all that she could learn, to become all that she could become by the grace of God. Making her great. Making her great just as Christ makes us great by his love.

This man doesn't see that and the wife he'd ignored at this crucial moment in his life, becomes the snag. She says, "No. No." And she precipitates a crisis. So here's the third point: the emperor throws a fit. Look at verse 12, "Queen Vashti refused to come at the

king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him." He couldn't control his wife and he couldn't control his temper. Matthew Henry says, "He had rule over 127 provinces but he had no rule over his own spirits." He was enraged. He could control the drinking habits of all his royal subjects by his royal decree but he could not control his own temper.

He summons the wise men and their discussion and decision can be read in verses 13 through to verse 22. They have all this discussion. "What are we going to do with Queen Vashti? What are we going to do? What are we going to do?" They tell him what he wants to hear. Here's one of the great things you know about becoming a great person, famous or a celebrity or a person in some kind of power, whether in an organization in a church or in a state, it is the people around you will never tell you what you need to hear. I've talked to two important men this week and after my conversation with them I realized that in their whole career no one had ever questioned them on a particular thing that they were teaching. Nobody had ever questioned them, and they had begun to believe that they were absolutely impregnable and untouchable.

So what you have here from verse 13 onwards, is these, the top men in the empire, they're brought into the king, they sit next to him, they are part of the party, they don't want to say anything out of place. They don't want to lose their seat at the table. They want to have the privileges of power, of influence, and when he asks them, they tell him exactly what he wants to hear, and they tell him, "What you need to do is you need more legislation." That's what politicians are always going to tell you to do, isn't it? Make more laws.

So here's the law that they made, look at verse 22, listen to this. And the author I think by this time, if we could read the Hebrew, his hand is shaking with laughter as he says this. You have to read from verse 13 to get this whole thing. I'm not going to read it all. The King said to the wise men who knew the times and were versed in the law, the men that sat next to him, the great names of these men, the seven princes of Persia and Media who saw the king's face and sat first in the kingdom. According to the law what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she's not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs? One said one thing and one said another thing and one said another. Then in the end, this is the royal decree, verse 22, "He sent letters to all the royal provinces," from India to Ethiopia, all 127 provinces, "to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language," and here's the punchline, "that every man be master in his own household." That every man be master in his own household. Do you see what this action of Vashti has done? It's taken this monumental picture of this monumental man with his monumental might and his monumental empire with all his monumental riches and monumental ego that have been painted before our eyes, she has taken this and with one word she has pricked the bubble and we discover that under all, there is a man who is a wimp. A shadow of what a man should be. Real men don't need edicts. Real men don't need to hide behind legislation. Real men don't need to legislate for their homes. Real men die for their homes. Real men die for their spouses. Real men sacrifice. Real men earn respect. Real men earn love. Real men earn a following. I think

it was Winston Churchill once said, "You know where the real leader is by noticing who the people are following."

Well, we learn some lessons from this. Husbands loving and leading their wives to be all they can by fulfilling their gifts and their godly ambitions. Men, if we were more like Jesus and less like Ahasuerus, our wives would delight in us and delight to follow us. Well, the lessons we learn are, first of all: don't take earthly power and glory too seriously. In many ways, this kingdom is like all of the great kingdoms of the world still to this day, a place of power and influence, and in chapter 1 we are invited to see and view this world and its kingdom from the values of a new perspective because the book of Esther wants us to stop being so dazzled by the trappings of earthly glory and power and prestige. The book of Esther wants us to recognize that not only is a life lived in pursuit of these things empty and foolish, it's absolutely absurd. It's laughable in the eternal perspective. In Psalm 2, it goes on to say to one enthroned in heaven laughs. He laughs them to scorn. Those who think the world is as important as the world thinks it is, my goodness, we need to mock it ourselves and laugh at it. It teaches us that the pompous Ahasuerus who doesn't realize that a man's life does not consist in the abundance of what he has. Don't be impressed.

Secondly, human authority only has relevance because of God's will. We don't see at the beginning of this book how everything is going to work out. In fact, in the first chapter here, there is no reference even to the people of God. The events of this first chapter would have been unheard of or unknown by the people of God in Persia. They wouldn't have known what happened, the king's parties, because they weren't invited; the king's wife, the queen, and her resistance; the scene behind the scenes where all the important people get together and they have this, the boys all get together in their little club and they gang up against this girl to try and make sure that she doesn't have her place in the kingdom anymore and then make it universal. They would have heard about the universal but they wouldn't know about the background details.

And yet God is at work in this. Our Catechism says God's works of providence are his most holy, wise and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures and all their actions. And while we may be looking at this first chapter and asking the question, "What in the world is going on?" God doesn't tell you ahead of time. He doesn't give you a kind of road plan for your life so that when obstacles arise, when circumstances change, when difficulties are thrown at you, you know why. And always be cautious, will you, of those spiritually, hyper-spiritually minded people who come along and say they've got an answer that they want to give you. No. "Do you know what God's telling you in this? God has told me that you need to...this and this and this is happening." Beware of that kind of stuff. God's providence is like Hebrew, John Flavel said, it's like the Hebrew language, it's best read backwards. Only looking back do you see how it was this thing and that thing and this event and that event and that conversation that led to God's unfolding plan happening. This book tells us. Words that Dr. Boice used once, "Wait and see what God will do." Wait and see what God will do.



And then, the last thing that this first chapter teaches us is that there is another king and a better kingdom. I said earlier when we were beginning, if you remember right at the very beginning I quoted from Ephesians and God's purpose in Christ Jesus to bring everything together in him. Well, the Bible is like that and you say, "Well, where is Jesus in Esther 1?" And the answer, of course, is that Jesus is in the Bible sometimes very clearly, sometimes by way of comparison, but at other times he's in the Bible by way of contrast. This is how he's to be found here, by way of contrast because he's not like Ahasuerus. When Ahasuerus summoned his wife, it was actually to shame her in public and he wasn't thinking about that, of course, he was doing that unconsciously, but that would have been the effect. When the Lord Jesus summons his bride, it is not to shame her, it is to cherish her. It is to bestow his love upon her. It is to wash her feet with salvation. It is to put the spread of his love around her. It is to show ultimately before a watching world her righteousness, the gift of righteousness that he has given to her. It is to show her off before a watching universe, not in her shame but in her glory. And his banquet that he prepares for her will be for her, for her glory.

When the Lord Jesus calls his church to himself, it's about life and joy. Did you realize that the story of the Bible is about this? When you come to the opening chapters of the Bible, you read about Adam and Eve and how God brought the woman out of the man and then gave her back to the man and they become one flesh and they have children, you thought at the beginning it's all about marriage. You come to the New Testament and Paul says the great mystery is it was never about that marriage, it was about the marriage we were made for, the marriage between Christ and his people, Christ and the church. It was always about the heavenly husband who is coming; who unlike many earthly husbands abuse perhaps their power. And can I just add in here, spousal abuse is a reality and if you are being pushed or shoved or hurt, go to the police immediately, and if you talk to the pastor and he says go and talk to your husband who has been doing it, ignore him and go to the police immediately. Let the police work it out. Even if you don't press charges, it will scare the living daylights out of that lout for touching you in that way. It's unacceptable. Our heavenly husband does not mistreat his people, he loves them. He seeks them out. He wins them over. He lavishes his love upon them. He dies for them.

"From heaven he came and sought her,  
To be his holy bride,  
With his own love he blood he bought her,  
And for her life he died."

Daughter of Eve, have you been hurt? Come to Jesus who is the caring husband of our souls. And all of us, daughters of Eve and sons of Adam, Jesus alone treats us with dignity, loves us unfailingly, and will welcome us joyfully to that great feast on that great day.

Let's pray together.

*Jesus, our shepherd, husband, friend, our prophet, priest and king, we thank you that you are not like this man but that you are a gracious and loving Lord and we pray that today*

*we might find in you individually and corporately, our joy, our peace and our all. We pray in your name, Lord Jesus. Amen.*