

Introduction to Esther

Esther 1:1-22

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"All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." (2 Timothy 3:16)

Introduction

Please open your Bibles to the book of Esther, which is the last historical book before the Wisdom Literature. So if you open it in the middle and land in Job, Psalms, or Proverbs, just back up before Job. We are starting a nine-week study this morning on a fascinating book. A lot of commentaries group Esther and Ruth together, but other than them both featuring an orphaned or widowed woman as the main character, they feel completely opposite. Ruth is a quiet story that takes place in fields and villages among peasants, Esther is a grand story taking place in the palace of the largest world super-power at the time. Ruth feels almost like a Hallmark movie with a mother-in-law and a potential husband who is a farmer; whereas Esther feels like a Shakespearean play full of sex, violence, and many twists and turns. Not everyone has loved this book - the great Protestant Reformer, Martin Luther, saw no value in this book, saying, "The book of Esther I toss into the Elbe River... I am such an enemy to the book of Esther that I wish it did not exist." But Luther was wrong, Esther is a wonderful book, and we will profit much from studying it in its complexity.

There is a billboard in Wilmington that you pass as you get into the city from the south that says: "We're just 75 years since the gas chambers. So no, a billboard calling out Jew hate isn't an overreaction. #EndJewHate." Apparently, the billboards were started in Florida after neo-Nazi demonstrations in Orlando and a rise in crimes against Jewish people there. But as we're going to see in the book of Esther, the Jews being targets of hate has a long history and attempts to wipe them out go back way farther than the Nazis gas chambers; this historical account happened almost 500 years before the birth of Christ. The Jews have been targeted for persecution at many times throughout the history of the world, sometimes even by people calling themselves Christians. But we have to think beyond just an ethnic group being targeted; we have to think of the Jews as God's people, because, well, they were. But God's people grew to include people from all nations after the life of Jesus. And God's people have been targeted since the Garden of Eden by the enemy, Satan, and they continue to be targeted by him. And Esther is one story of how God rescued His people. We won't see God's name in this book, but we see His invisible hand of providence throughout.

One of the reasons that Esther is included in the Old Testament is to explain why the Jews celebrate Purim, one of the five major feasts of Judaism. The entire book of Esther has been read aloud in Jewish synagogues during the Purim celebrations historically. As it was read, the congregation would participate; they would rattle noisemakers and stomp their feet when the villain in the story's name was read.¹ Pur is the word for casting of lots, which is kind of like rolling dice. We'll find out early that the villain in Esther, Haman, threw Pur to decide which day would be best to have all the Jews killed. So Purim is a celebration of God's deliverance from that. Jewish people fast the day before, but then they feast and party on Purim. The adults drink a lot of wine, the children wear costumes, and they give food and gifts to needy people.² The upcoming dates for the Purim celebration will be March 6-7. We have to study Esther to understand the context for this feast.

¹ TableTalk magazine's Friday, June 18, 2010 devotional "The Days of Purim."

² https://www.chabad.org/holidays/purim/article_cdo/aid/3263355/jewish/Why-Do-Jews-Go-Berserk-on-Purim.htm

Before we jump into the text, let's get our bearings for when the events in the book happened historically. (*Tempted to do pub trivia like the Men's Bible Study.*) You remember the three Kings who reigned over the "United Kingdom" of the twelve tribes during the Golden Age of Israel – Saul, David, and Solomon? Their reigns were around 1,000 BC. Because of Solomon's unfaithfulness, the Lord split the kingdom into two – the Northern kingdom, which was called Israel and had 10 of the tribes, and the Southern kingdom, which was called Judah and had the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin. The Northern kingdom had terrible, wicked kings and fell to the Assyrians in the 700s BC. The Southern kingdom had some godly kings who kept them faithful for longer, but they were eventually invaded by Babylon and taken into captivity in 586 BC. Babylon was conquered by the Persians and King Cyrus in 539 BC, and so the Jewish captives were then under a new occupying nation. But Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to their homeland, so many of them went back to Jerusalem to rebuild after 70 years of captivity; that's what the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, and Zechariah are about. But many of them stayed where they had been transplanted and did not return. The Jews in the book of Esther were living in exile in Persia roughly 50 years after Cyrus first allowed Jews to return home; their families had made the conscious decision to stay where they had grown accustomed to living in a foreign land and not return to their homeland.

One of the big themes in this book is looking at life in a pagan world where the godly are threatened and forced to assimilate. Esther is about how to live in a culture where your faith is in a minority. How do you follow God when your life could be threatened by the powers that be, and how do you follow God in morally ambiguous situations? Esther will be challenging because we'll see more bad examples than good ones, even for those who are God's people. There are similarities to the story of Joseph, who had a high position in Egypt, and to Daniel, who had a high position in Babylon. Perhaps the biggest similarities are to Moses' story and the Exodus account: we'll see a threat to the Hebrew people by the pagan nation they lived in, an initial reluctance of the main character to step up and deliver the people, then a confrontation with the foreign king, eventual favor with him, followed by military victory, and the institution of a sacred festival.³

That's enough background. Let's jump into the text and work through the first nine verses (ESV):

I. The King Shows Off His Riches (vv. 1-9)

¹ Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, ² in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, ³ in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, ⁴ while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. ⁵ 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 in the court of the garden of the king's palace. ⁶ There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. ⁷ Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. ⁸ And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. ⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

Let's meet the king: Ahasuerus (*rhymes with Lazarus*) reigned for twenty-one years from 486 – 465 BC. He is also known by his Greek name, Xerxes; that is how the NIV version refers to him. The text says that Ahasuerus reigned from India to Ethiopia, which (according to Christopher Ash), "if you

³ L. Allen and T. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), p. 173.

superimpose the Persian Empire on a modern map, it would more or less cover north-western India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, northern Greece, Egypt, Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and northern Sudan.”⁴ You don’t have to be great at geography to understand that that is a monster of an empire! The action of the book mostly takes place in the capital city of Susa.; there is still a town in Iran called Shush (near the Iraq border) that stands where the royal city of Susa once stood.⁵ The Persian king was the most powerful man on earth ruling the greatest empire at the time (a century before Alexander the Great’s time). There is a strong likelihood that the banquets showing off Ahasuerus’ riches were meant as visual reminders that if you fought for him, he had the means to reward you mightily.

Have you ever seen the book, *The Millionaire Next Door*? The premise is that there are a lot of wealthy people that you would never know were wealthy because they don’t show off their money. And that’s why they’ve become wealthy – because they’re frugal and drive used cars and don’t dress flashy or have other expensive things. Basically, Ahasuerus is the exact opposite of that. He had it all and he flaunted it all. It was more like that old MTV show, *Cribs*, or the even older show, *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, where celebrities showed off their amazing houses, pools, and cars. His riches would have exceeded every person on that show combined – verse 6 says he had couches made of gold and silver and pavement made of precious stones, and we see that he had the resources to feed all his guests for a long time.

His banquet for all of the VIPs - his officials, soldiers, nobles, governors, etc. - lasted half of the year; take a moment just to fathom that. Then it says that the second feast was for all the people, and it lasted for a week. Can you imagine throwing a smaller party that ONLY lasts for a week? Sometimes we’re exhausted if we host people for four or five hours. But with the Persian king, the party just kept going and there was no end to the food and entertainment. These parties gave new meaning to the term “open bar” – everyone got their own uniquely made gold goblet and there was basically no cut-off point for any of the guests; drink as much as you want, the servants will keep your glass full. What could go wrong?

As you think about the wealth and splendor of the Persian king and his palace, perhaps you think back to another king who was wealthier than any other king up to his time, Solomon. We talked a lot about him when we studied Ecclesiastes. Solomon’s palace and temple were incredibly rich and ornate places that highlighted his wealth, wisdom, and blessings from God. But now the Jews, the Israelites, Solomon’s people were basically just poor citizens of a powerful kingdom. I wonder if they thought back to Solomon every time they passed the palace in Susa. If they did, hopefully they remembered that it wasn’t a foreign power that led to the downfall of Israel, it was the people’s own sin and rebellion against God. If Solomon and the successive kings had pleased God, Israel would have stayed powerful for much longer. But it was not to be. Persia did not please God either, but they were not God’s chosen people, so God did not hold them to the standard that He held Israel.

We see that the queen, Vashti, gave a feast for the women at the same time, a banquet for the wives, sisters, and mothers of the important men of Susa. But she would become involved in her husband’s affairs soon. Ahasuerus had been showing off all of his possessions and wealth, there was just one more thing that he wanted to show off: his wife.

⁴ Christopher Ash, *Teaching Ruth & Esther: From Text to Message* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2021), p. 155.

⁵ Ray C. Stedman, *For Such A Time as This: Secrets of Strategic Living from the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: Discovery, 2010), p. 14.

II. The King Shows Off His Queen (vv. 10-15)

¹⁰ On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, ¹¹ to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. ¹² But 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. ¹³ Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, ¹⁴ the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): ¹⁵ "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?"

The king was "merry with wine," which is a euphemism for being drunk. With no advisors willing to question his bad decisions, the king decided that the queen should come and show herself to all these princes and men who were attending his feast. Apparently, the queen didn't want to just be a "trophy wife," didn't care to just be trotted out so everyone would look at her beauty and think how great the king was for having her as his queen. Many commentators say that when the text says, "bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown," it meant wearing only her crown.⁶ Clearly, she didn't like being used that way and refused to come. Good for her, right, standing up for her own dignity in the face of her husband's brutish request. Marriage does not mean that a man gets to boss his wife around. Men, this should remind us that we should be careful how we treat our wives and what we ask of them, desiring to honor and cherish them, not demean and treat them in a way that assaults their dignity. 1 Peter 3:7 says, "Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered." Now, some people only heard the word "weaker" when I read that, which is unfortunate, because I heard "understand your wives, show them honor, they are co-heirs with you." Now we don't throw out all the emphasis on a husband being the head of his wife and his family. We believe men should lead their families and that they are responsible before God for the direction they go and the decisions that their families make. But it's a sacrificial, servant leadership.

But, clearly, that's not how things worked in ancient Persia – the king could demand whatever he wanted, and Vashti's refusal infuriated him. His word was law but notice in verse 15 that he didn't know what to do; he had to consult his advisors. Surely, she needed to be punished, but there was no custom, no law on the books for this kind of situation. So he turned to his royal advisors: "Guys, what do I do now so that I don't look worse than I already do?"

The advisors will propose a solution that elevated this from a marital spat to a national emergency:

III. The King Shows Off His Power (vv. 16-22)

¹⁶ Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. ¹⁷ For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' ¹⁸ This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. ¹⁹ If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let

⁶ Jane Roach, *God's Mysterious Ways: Embracing God's Providence in Esther* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2016), p. 80.

it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. ²⁰ *So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.* ²¹ *This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed.* ²² *He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.*

This decision sounds like, “We need to make an example of this most public wife so that all the other wives in the nation don’t start disobeying their husbands.” It’s a slippery slope – once the women see that the queen can get away with disobeying her husband, that’s all you’ll have in every household. These advisors sound like they were worried about their own wives dishonoring them; they needed a royal decree declaring them masters of their houses. Vashti needed to be made an example of. She needed to be punished, removed from her high position, and eventually replaced.

We need to remember to laugh a little at these things. It all sounds very official and serious, but there’s some real satire in there. This king who had been showing off his wealth, who had the power to command armies and a vast nation, had now been exposed as someone who could not even control his wife and didn’t know what to do when it backfired on him. He had to issue royal decrees, alert the whole kingdom that his wife had embarrassed him. You do something like that in private and keep it quiet, maybe it gets out, but it can be denied. But publishing it for the entire kingdom means everyone hears about it. The citizens of the kingdom were probably laughing too. We also need to let that be a big reminder to us that we can never acquire enough things to make us happy. This king could celebrate for half a year with an absurd amount of wealth, but his inability to control one person left him absolutely enraged. If it takes that little to spoil your life, there is never enough gold in the treasury, enough women in the harem, or enough wine in the bar to fill your heart with happiness. Which is what Solomon found and why he wrote Ecclesiastes: everything is vanity, it’s all just chasing after the wind.

We also need to see this as a foreshadowing for the later part of our story involving Haman and Mordecai: A man needs everyone to respect him and when one single person refuses to do so, he gets angry. And in his anger, he arranges for a royal edict to be sent that will affect the entire nation, not just the one person he is angry with. We’ll get there, this is a wonderful story to watch unfold. The other foreshadowing is that this royal decree cannot be overturned or repealed, as verse 19 says. That will come into play later in the book as well.

The end of verse 19 - *“Let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.”* That is essentially the introduction to Esther, though we haven’t met her yet. A drunk, vain, powerful king angry at his offended wife in the midst of a depraved, overly extravagant party provided an opening for God to bring a solution to the threat against His people that would soon emerge. And sometimes that’s how God works – in the midst of sinful, dysfunctional people hurting other sinful, dysfunctional people at the highest and the lowest levels of society.

Conclusion

In case you didn’t know it, you have something in common with the Persian people: you too are invited to a banquet that will bring great glory to its host. As much as the party described in Esther 1 sounds outrageously lavish and impossible to top, this party that you’re invited to will make it look like a meal at a fast-food restaurant at a rest stop along the highway. The party that you’re invited to will last for eternity and it will never run out of food, drink, or splendid accommodations.

And the host is greater than any of us can imagine. He is not just the ruler of a certain number of provinces, He is the Creator and Ruler of everything that exists, the true King of Kings. He has always existed and will always exist, and His greatness is beyond measure. He is all-knowing, all-powerful, and the source of all other things that exist. He doesn't need any of us to join Him, He is complete and perfect in His being. But He shares His love with those whom He calls His people. Your heavenly Father awaits your RSVP and your presence at the heavenly feast that He is preparing.

Even if your life here on earth has been full of hardship and heartbreak, it is a small fraction of the time that you will spend in eternal glory and splendor if you believe in Jesus and accept His sacrificial death in your place. Jesus gave His life for His bride, the Church. Rather than banishing her for her rebellion, He extended grace to her by taking her punishment for her. He is the opposite of Ahasuerus, not parading His wealth and abusing His people, but allowing Himself to be shamed, disgraced, paraded naked in front of a crowd while He hung on a cross because of His love for you.

➔ Transition to Communion

Benediction

1 Kings 8:57-58 – *“The Lord our God be with us, as He was with our fathers. May He not leave us or forsake us, that He may incline our hearts to Him, to walk in all His ways and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His rules, which He commanded to our fathers.”*