

ESTHER

1:1-22

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Taught at our Sunday evening service, 23rd October 2022 @ Deal Christian Fellowship

Reading: Deuteronomy 31:14-21

Good evening. Let's pray.

Introduction

Tonight we're going to begin a verse by verse study of the Old Testament book of Esther, and over the next 6 weeks (including tonight) we're going to read through what is recorded there, and consider the examples of character we find in it.

And we'll come across drunkenness, marital problems, misogyny, a plot to kill the king, anti-semitism, attempted genocide, pride, and violence. But we'll also come across love, courage, and most certainly - God's providence.

Now, for some quick details about the book:

- Author: Ezra, the scribe
- Location: Shusan (also known as Susa, which is nearby modern day Shush in Iran)

- Length: 10 chapters, 167 verses, 5637 words (so around twice the length of 1 John)
- Timing: Likely 516-506 B.C. (during the era of the Medo-Persian empire)
- Theme: The deliverance of the Jews during their Babylonian captivity (the feast of Purim)



Susa is a UNESCO World Heritage Site (abandoned and in ruins), found in what today we know as Iran (not to be confused with Susa, Italy).

However, you may or not be aware, that this is actually a very unusual book in the Bible - for it doesn't mention God once, despite mentioning the king 195 times in 167 verses. Neither does it mention heaven, hell, prayer, or faith, either. Why is that?

Well, one thing we do know for sure is Israel had disobeyed God. They had walked away from Him - just as God had said they would in our reading from Deuteronomy 31 earlier. And their continual rebellion had resulted in them being taken captive by King Nebuchadnezzar of the Babylonians. And so during this time they are not focussed on God as they ought to be. Indeed, we see that even once back in the land they are easily distracted by the building and furnishing of their own homes, rather than serving God - that's recorded in the book of Haggai. So is it surprising that during this time of crisis, recorded in the book of Esther, that we don't see them cry out to God? Perhaps not.

So is it a problem that it doesn't mention God? Martin Luther thought so. To say he disliked the book is probably an understatement. I've heard it said that he didn't even think it should be included in the Bible, in part because it contained much pagan naughtiness.

Yet, it is in the Bible. Why? Well, we'd be mistaken to think that Israel's unfaithfulness to God resulted in any unfaithfulness by Him. God still had a plan and purpose for them. His plan to send His Son into the world through them, for them, and for us, was still intact. As we read in 2 Timothy:

2 Timothy 2:13

If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself.

So what we see here in Esther, is God's providence despite their lack of obedience. What is providence? It is His working of things together for His purpose, and for His people. J Vernon McGee describes it more fully like this:

Providence is the means by which God directs all things; both animate and inanimate; seen and unseen; good and evil toward a worthy purpose, which means His will must finally prevail.

J Vernon McGee

He goes on to describe providence as the unseen rudder on the ship. And indeed, God has used seemingly-at-first small details in History to radically change things for His purposes and our good. And in the case of the book of Esther, we see God's arranging of circumstances to save His people, despite that they were living out of His will in rebellion to Him. Sound familiar? It should, for we read in Romans 5:8...

Romans 5:8

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

But this book doesn't mention God?! You might still be thinking. Well, in case that bothers you - as it did Luther - note that God's name *is* included, but hidden. Finnis Dake points out that in the ancient Hebrew text there were 5 places where the name of God was hidden, being abbreviated--JHVH for JeHoVaH on 4 occasions, and 'EHYEH (I Am that I Am) once. These letters were used as acrostics in certain parts of the book - that is where certain letters in each line form a word or words. And in 3 of the MSS manuscripts, they were written larger than the rest of the text so that they stood out boldly on the scroll. If you want to learn more about this, I suggest both Finnis Dake's Bible commentary, and two of Chuck Missler's books titled *Hidden Treasures* and *Cosmic Codes*.

Also, Katie has helpfully compiled much of this info as relates to the book of Esther in some study notes she made - I'm sure she'd be happy to share them with you.

What do we take from this? That God is working behind the scenes in ways we can't even comprehend. And that nothing in your life, not even a crisis, is something that has caught God off guard. Charles Spurgeon noted...

God is too good to be unkind and He is too wise to be mistaken. And when we cannot trace His hand, we must trust His heart.

Charles Spurgeon

Now, in a moment we'll take a look at the layout of this book, but there's one more thing we should consider - and that's the wider context in which this book sits, and for that we should turn to Genesis chapter 3, which describes the fall of man - where Eve, then Adam, believed the lie that Satan sold them that they could not trust God, and that disobeying Him would be not only pleasurable, but for their good.

Following that, we read God's rebuke to Satan in verses 14 and 15:

Genesis 3:14-15

So the LORD God said to the serpent: "Because you have done this, You are cursed more than all cattle, And more than every beast of the field; On your belly you shall go, And you shall eat dust All the days of your life. And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel."

This was more than a description of actual snakes. It is the explanation of all that we see throughout the Bible, where Satan would try desperately to stop the line through to Christ. First through the giants before the flood, then through Egypt's oppression, through the giants after the flood (including Goliath), and then through Israel's continued enemies - including Haman here in the book of Esther who tried to eliminate them as a nation.

Satan's attempts ultimately failed, but he continues to try and eliminate the Jews - why? Because if he couldn't prevent Christ's first coming, he'll do all he can to prevent His second coming by removing Israel, the reason for His return. And whether Haman or Hitler (and there's perhaps a closer link between those two that we'll get to), he'll motivate men and women against the Jews.

That is the wider context of this book - that Satan did not want Jesus to come as our Saviour. In his pride, he wanted to be like God. So he certainly doesn't want anyone to be joint heirs with Christ. And in the account we have in the book of Esther, we see how vicious his attempt was to prevent Christ's coming, by destroying the earthly human line through to Him.

Overview of Esther

So then, zooming in from that context to this specific book, we see an incredible chapter in Jewish history where their very existence was under threat. Yet, through the events we'll read here, we'll see how they were delivered through the actions and words of Mordecai and Esther, which I believe we should absolutely ascribe to God's providence, even though Israel were at this time out of the will of God, and suffering the consequences of having disobeyed Him and been taken captive to a foreign land.

Here's how the chapters are laid out:

- Chapter 1 (22 verses) - The King removes Vashti as Queen
- Chapter 2 (23 verses) - Esther is made Queen, while Mordecai uncovers a plot
- Chapter 3 (15 verses) - Haman plots against the Jews
- Chapter 4 (17 verses) - Esther agrees to help the Jews
- Chapter 5 (14 verses) - Esther sets a banquet while Haman plots against Mordecai
- Chapter 6 (14 verses) - The King dreams and Mordecai is honoured
- Chapter 7 (10 verses) - Haman's plot is unveiled but he is killed instead
- Chapter 8 (17 verses) - Haman's plot against the Jews is reversed
- Chapter 9 (32 verses) - The Jews overcome their enemies
- Chapter 10 (3 verses) - Mordecai's position remembered

Overview of chapter one

Tonight then, we'll going to study all of chapter one. And we'll see the chapter begin with...

- v1-9 - The feasting of an affluent, godless, powerful nation
- v10-12 - The King's request, and Queen's refusal
- v13-20 - The King's counsellors advice
- v21-22 - The King follows the advice

Chapter one

So let's begin chapter one. First, in these opening 3 verses, Ezra informs us of the ruler, the place, and the time at which these events take place. We read in verse 1...

Esther 1:1

Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus (this was the Ahasuerus who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia),

We're told specifically who the king was through the detail here, as Ahasuerus was a title given to some Persian kings, it wasn't a name. Much in the same way that Emperors of the Roman Empire would each be called Caesar. In the case of the title Ahasuerus, it meant "the Mighty or Venerable king". So who was *this* Ahasuerus?

There's some difference of opinion, but given the detail the Bible provides, we can rule some individuals in, and some out. And while quite a few suggest that it was Xerxes who reigned from 485-464 B.C., that could not be the case given that it would mean not only Mordecai would have been 162 at the beginning of Xerxes reign, and more significantly Esther would have been an old woman too - which we're explicitly told in this book that she was young.

Therefore, Finnis Dake concludes in his commentary that this King Ahasuerus was actually Darius the Mede, who we also meet in Daniel chapter 5 - making Esther therefore the mother of Cyrus, the commander of the Persian armies which took Babylon at the end of the 70 years of servitude.

While that conclusion doesn't change our understanding of the events this book, it does help us get a better picture that these are not fictitious people, though the critics would love to have us think that, but rather these are real people, in a real place, with the events taking place at a specific time in history. And we read...

Esther 1:2

in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan the citadel,

That is, this took place in what we know today as Iran, and while the king was living there, rather than one of his other residences. This is the same place called Shushing that Nehemiah mentions. And we are told the timing:

Esther 1:3

that in the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and servants—the powers of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of the provinces being before him—

Using Dake's conclusions, this would be 32 years before the decree of Cyrus to restore Jerusalem and the temple. And this chapter continues...

Esther 1:4

when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty for many days, one hundred and eighty days in all.

So this was a huge feast, with the intent to show off. Perhaps large enough so that all the invited people throughout the kingdom could come. Some suggest that this was to demonstrate the King's greatness so as to gain support for further conquests of as yet undefeated nations such as Greece. And what do you do at the end of a 180 day feast? We read...

Esther 1:5

And when these days were completed, the king made a feast lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Shushan the citadel, from great to small, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

Clearly, 180 days wasn't enough! Of course, the last day of our holidays usually brings thoughts of how we'd like it to go on, right? But this is something else. And it seems these last 7 days were on another level of luxury too...

Esther 1:6

There were white and blue linen curtains fastened with cords of fine linen and purple on silver rods and marble pillars; and the couches were of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of alabaster, turquoise, and white and black marble.

Before you think "I'm not sure I'd want that same interior designer", remember that throughout history it's not always been easy to get all the colours we have today - you couldn't just pop to B&Q or John Lewis; such luxury came through hard work and great expense. And second, most importantly here, these colours were very likely symbolic - especially blue and purple.

Esther 1:7

And they served drinks in golden vessels, each vessel being different from the other, with royal wine in abundance, according to the generosity of the king.

It wasn't that the king couldn't afford a matching set, but rather these were one-of-a-kind bespoke golden vessels, which were filled with royal wine - no doubt, the best the land had to offer.

But then we read...

Esther 1:8

In accordance with the law, the drinking was not compulsory; for so the king had ordered all the officers of his household, that they should do according to each man's pleasure.

So, drinking was not compulsory. It wasn't mandated as it was among the Greeks where each guest was obliged to drink the round with all the others or leave - perhaps like some after-work cultures still are today. But despite no compulsion to drink we'll see in just a couple of verses, desire overtook what was reasonable.

Now, at the same time as this was happening we read:

Esther 1:9

Queen Vashti also made a feast for the women in the royal palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.

And so here then is the central character of this chapter, feasting separately to the men as was the culture of that time - and indeed even still is today in some eastern cultures.

And All seems well. The King has shown his greatness, his riches, and has ended the feast on a high point by adding another 7 days of unbridled luxury. But then, we read...

Esther 1:10

On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus,

And here enters the problem. *The heart of the king was merry with wine.*

Though there was no compulsion for anyone to drink at all, the king had drunk to excess, and as we'll see, his judgement was clouded. What began as a royal banquet had degenerated into a drunken party - and we'll see the consequences soon enough. As Solomon warned:

Proverbs 20:1

Wine is a mocker, Strong drink is a brawler, And whoever is led astray by it is not wise.

And indeed in your own life, if you can't control yourself, it is better not to drink, better not to go to the pub, or have alcohol in your house. Solomon further warns:

Proverbs 23:29-35

Who has woe? Who has sorrow? Who has contentions? Who has complaints? Who has wounds without cause? Who has redness of eyes? Those who linger long at the wine, Those who go in search of mixed wine. Do not look on the wine when it is red, When it sparkles in the cup, When it swirls around smoothly; At the last it bites like a serpent, And stings like a viper. Your eyes will see strange things, And your heart will utter perverse things. Yes, you will be like one who lies down in the midst of the sea, Or like one who lies at the top of the mast, saying: "They have struck me, but I was not hurt; They have beaten me, but I did not feel it. When shall I awake, that I may seek another drink?"

But here, the king is indeed led astray by his excessive drinking, and not just his heart, but his lips will utter perverse things. Making a request that he never would have done if he were sober. So what does he command these eunuchs, these servants? We read...

Esther 1:11

to bring Queen Vashti before the king, wearing her royal crown, in order to show her beauty to the people and the officials, for she was beautiful to behold.

So the king was intent on parading the queen as a trophy. As a piece of meat. Yes, husbands, it is good that you are attracted to your wife. The Bible speaks quite explicitly about that. God invented beauty, and He invented sex, and commanded it for the sake of multiplying. But husbands, don't treat your wife as a mere trophy. That's a terrible thing to do, and makes a gross underestimate of her value as a person.

Nor, put other men in the awkward position of asking them "do you think my wife is stunning?!" - If your friends says no, you'll be offended. If your friend says yes, they may be looking at and thinking about your wife more than they should be!

Furthermore, your wife's beauty is not something to be paraded - but as we saw this morning, Biblical instruction is for women to be discreet, not to parade themselves or be paraded by others for their beauty, but outwardly they should be known for, Peter writes, the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God.

Here, the king has behaved at best ungentlemanly, and at worst crudely or shamefully in making this request of the Queen. Can you imagine this? You certainly shouldn't try it at home: "Hey honey, come in here so my mates can gawp at you." It's shocking, really.

But this is even more surprising given the culture, and the position of the King. Finnis Dake describes the situation well:

It was unusual for an eastern king to make his queen expose herself before a company of drunken revellers. It was not only unbecoming to her femininity, but to her rank as queen. Furthermore, household servants instead of nobles were sent to bring her, and her exposure was to be before the common people. By Persian custom, the queen was especially secluded from public gaze. The king would not have tolerated this exposure had he been sober; he would have known that his own honor as well as hers would be insulted.

Finnis Dake

So what is her response? We read...

Esther 1:12

But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command brought by his eunuchs; therefore the king was furious, and his anger burned within him.

The king was wrong to want to parade the queen around. But was she right to refuse? Well, certainly she was wise in not joining the feast if we read Solomon's wisdom in Proverbs:

Proverbs 23:20-21

Do not mix with winebibbers, Or with gluttonous eaters of meat; For the drunkard and the glutton will come to poverty, And drowsiness will clothe a man with rags.

But the problem her decision created wasn't merely because of the message, but the manner. Not just the action, but the attitude. Perhaps the queen could have asked for the king to come and see her - to reason with him. But she refuses in a way that at least these 7 Eunuchs are all immediately aware of this news, and perhaps, all those in the king's presence would be immediately aware of when she didn't show up and they inform the King.

And it leaves the King in a public situation where the guests may have started to say "What kind of a king is he that he cannot even command the queen?"

Some believe that for the sake of the King, she should have obeyed. But as we heard this morning, wives should not be submissive to their husbands when their husbands are asking them to do things outside of the will of God.

Now, what we see here is a failure of the kind that we were expressly warned of in our study of 1 Peter chapter 3 today - there our pastor warned that without love it's hard for wives to respond with respect, and without respect it's hard for husbands to respond in love. In this case, the King was most unloving toward Queen Vashti. And her response is, perhaps understandably, but not necessarily helpfully so, lacking in respect.

And now the situation escalates quickly...

Esther 1:13-15

Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times (for this was the king's manner toward all who knew law and justice, those closest to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who had access to the king's presence, and who ranked highest in the kingdom): "What shall we do to Queen Vashti, according to law, because she did not obey the command of King Ahasuerus brought to her by the eunuchs?"

The king asks those closest to him what he should do. Which should serve as a reminder to be very careful who you choose as your friends, and let become close to you - for some will say anything to remain that close, agreeing with you when they shouldn't.

And out of this crisis meeting of the cabinet the King is provided this counsel:

Esther 1:16

And Memucan answered before the king and the princes: "Queen Vashti has not only wronged the king, but also all the princes, and all the people who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

Now indeed, there is some truth in this. For this couple are the focal point of the nation - rightly or wrongly. And their behaviour is evident to all. Indeed, it is so important in leadership that we - you and I - if we are so called, that we live beyond reproach, considering what the Bible says are qualifications of leadership, as we so quickly look for earthly qualifications.

But the problem is that the King's advisors don't dare rebuke him for his drunken request of the Queen - but focus solely on her response. Why? It seems they are worried about control in their own homes, for we read...

Esther 1:17-18

For the queen's behaviour will become known to all women, so that they will despise their husbands in their eyes, when they report, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in before him, but she did not come.' This very day the noble ladies of Persia and Media will say to all the king's officials that they have heard of the behaviour of the queen. Thus there will be excessive contempt and wrath.

The king's advisors, at least Memucan, is worried about the implications outside the palace - worried that this will set a precedent that all women will follow - that they will not respect their husbands, and in turn that will cause their husbands to be frustrated against the king.

Yet maybe they are overly worried - for surely if the women in the land were loved and not paraded by their husbands, then they will love, honour, respect them. Even submit to them when they make a decision for the family unit.

But the advice continues...

Esther 1:19

If it pleases the king, let a royal decree go out from him, and let it be recorded in the laws of the Persians and the Medes, so that it will not be altered, that Vashti shall come no more before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.

So, the suggestion is to make an example of Vashti - that is, no respect equals no benefits, and no relationship. And what do they hope will be the outcome?

Esther 1:20

When the king's decree which he will make is proclaimed throughout all his empire (for it is great), all wives will honor their husbands, both great and small."

What a sad and foolish suggestion this is. To try and motivate wives to respect their husbands through fear, rather than love. Yet, the king accepts this counsel:

Esther 1:21

And the reply pleased the king and the princes, and the king did according to the word of Memucan.

Why is this such an attractive option to the king? Well it requires no admission of error on his part, no apology, no contrition. It solves the problem without him having to change. But he loses the beautiful Queen Vashti in the process.

In the final verse of this chapter we read:

Esther 1:22

Then he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province in its own script, and to every people in their own language, that each man should be master in his own house, and speak in the language of his own people.

It might be God's order for the home, that the husband should lead his home, but gone about in entirely the wrong way. God's order in the home was not established that we might rule or control our wives, but that we might love them. That we might love them in such a way, that it would point to Christ's love for the church. And that just as the church loves, adores and obey's Christ willingly and gladly, so might wives love their husbands.

Conclusion

What do we make of all this? Well, it's certainly not an example of good and Godly behaviour! We see the danger of being led astray through drink, and how a lack of love, and lack of respect can fatally injure a marriage.

While this morning we heard how much value and importance there is in wives respecting their husbands, as men - as husbands, we must show love toward our wives. And love will never treat them as a trophy. It will never objectify them and treat them as a piece of meat. Rather, we are to love our wives sacrificially. We are to be prepared, we are to be willing to love our wives as Christ loved the church. That means we should be willing to lay down our lives. The problem is, many today are not even prepared to lay down their Xbox or Playstation controller. Or their mobile phone.

May we - men and women - look to the Bible for how our marriages should be conducted, or even the type of spouse we should seek if single. Rather than accept the counsel of foolish friends.

Application questions

As we go into this week, let's think very carefully on these 3 questions:

- Does alcohol ever affect your judgement? (You shouldn't let it)
- Husbands, do you love your wives?
- Wives, do you respect your husbands?

Let's pray.