

The (Persian) Empire Strikes Back

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[0 : 00] Please turn in your Bibles to Esther chapter 1, and we're going to read Esther chapter 1, verses 1 down through 9. Now, in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, 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, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, a hundred and eighty days.

And when those 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. 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 of pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl, and precious stones.

Drinks were served to the bounty of the king, 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.

[1 : 35] Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. Let me ask you a question.

If you had three minutes to dash into your home and grab your most prized possessions, what would you fill your arms with?

Perhaps you've seen some of the news and some of the video coming out of California. That got me thinking. What would I grab if I had to go into my home and only had a few minutes to grab what I prized most?

Most of you know that I like books, but if I only have three minutes, there is no way I could carry them all, and it would be really hard to choose which books to save.

Now, perhaps you would grab photo albums or a cherished family heirloom, maybe a musical instrument that you've had for a long time, perhaps a one-of-a-kind or irreplaceable gift, or maybe, for some of us, firearms or something like that.

[2 : 48] In Esther 1, King Ahasuerus shows us what he values most. He throws a massive, magnificent party for the nobles and governors of the Persian Empire, and for 180 days he parades his wealth, his splendor, and his glory before them.

This is a lavish, extravagant banquet. Now, I'm not sure I could keep your attention for 180 minutes with my most prized possessions, but Ahasuerus could, and he did.

And when that 180-day feast came to an end, he throws a second party for all the people of Susa, and this second banquet went on for another week.

And apparently, there was just one rule. It's down there in verse number 8. Do you see it? There are no rules. There is no compulsion.

This is an empire of indulgence, not wisdom. Now, before we go any further, let's orient ourselves to the setting of the book of Esther, because it's tempting to assume that since Esther seems to fall in the first one-third of your Bible, then it must have happened such a very, very long time ago.

[4 : 13] But I was surprised this week to learn that that's actually not the case. Consider this. The book of Esther records events during the reign of King Ahasuerus.

Now, he is known historically by his Greek name, and that's Xerxes, or Xerxes I. And he ruled the Persian Empire from 486 to 465 BC.

Now, those dates don't mean a lot to me. They just kind of sound like numbers. And so, I need some timeline markers.

I need some things that I can kind of drop on and go, Oh, yeah, okay, I see how that fits in the timeline. So, think about this. I think it's somewhat surprising. Esther happens only about 1400 years after God calls Abraham.

And the book of Esther, the events that are recorded for us here in Esther, occur in approximately the same time period as the birth of the Chinese philosopher Confucius.

[5 : 20] Now, that I can kind of wrap my hands around, right? Because I know a thing or two about Confucius. I've heard his name. And also, Socrates.

Same time period, approximately, as the book of Esther. If you are into the Olympics and Olympic history, then you might also be interested in knowing this.

At this point in time in world history, the Olympic Games already had a 200-year history. So, the book of Esther, I think, is actually much more current to us than we might otherwise realize.

Under King Ahasuerus, the Persian Empire is massive. Listen to what it includes.

It includes all, all of what is modern-day Iran, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Egypt, and Turkey.

[6 : 24] All of those modern-day countries. It also includes parts of Greece, the Balkans, parts of Russia, parts of Afghanistan, and parts of Pakistan.

No wonder it took the king 180 days to show off all of his stuff. There's a Greek historian named Herodotus, and he wrote just 25 years after the events recorded for us in Esther.

And we have his writings. They have survived down to modern day. And he describes King Ahasuerus this way. The tallest and most handsome of the Persian kings.

An ambitious and ruthless ruler. A brilliant warrior. And a jealous lover. Verse number nine.

Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Abegtha, Zithar, and Carcas.

[7 : 45] That's unfortunate, isn't it? The seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus 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.

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.

This incident, as we read it, may seem like a fairly minor domestic dispute. But there are two facts that we don't want to overlook here that add both drama and clarity.

Here's the first fact that I want you to see. Vashti embarrasses the king. Remember, King Ahasuerus has thrown this massive party for all of the nobles and the governors.

And he has shown them his wealth, his splendor, and his glory. Verse number four. And now, he wants to show off his beautiful queen.

[9 : 04] Some might crudely call Vashti his trophy wife. And there's a purpose to all of this show and tell. Ahasuerus is rallying support for his planned invasion of Greece.

He shows off all of his stuff in order to compel the nobles and the governors to obey his command and go to war with him. So, when Queen Vashti refuses to appear, this is an embarrassing egg on the face, spinach in the teeth moment for Ahasuerus.

Vashti embarrasses the king. Secondly, Vashti exposes the king. Look in your Bible and notice at verse 10.

And notice how the text links the king's drunkenness with his command to fetch Vashti. Look again at verse 10. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine.

That means what you think it means. He was drunk. He was intoxicated. And notice how immediately after that, he commands the eunuchs to go and bring Vashti to him.

[10 : 23] The author of Esther expects us to notice this, that the wine impairs the king's judgment. So, when Vashti refuses to degrade herself in front of a drunken mob of men, she exposes the king.

She exposes that he wields power unpredictably. She exposes his demand that it's disgusting.

She exposes that he doesn't care about his own queen's safety. She exposes, perhaps surprisingly, that the king can be refused.

Vashti embarrasses the king. And Vashti exposes the king. Notice in your Bible, verse number 11 makes two related commands about Vashti.

She is both beautiful and lovely to look at. And verse 12 gives us two related comments about Ahasuerus. He is enraged and his anger burns within him.

[11:42] And so he seeks counsel from his cabinet. Verse 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 judgments, the men next to him being Karshina, Sheethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marcina, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face and sat first in the kingdom.

According to the law, the king asks, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus, delivered by the eunuchs?

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 people who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

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.

Now I want you to notice something. Notice how the author of Esther highlights the political nature of Vashti's refusal by describing the king's cabinet.

[13:17] They are supposedly wise men. It reminds me a little bit of King Nebuchadnezzar's wise men. Supposedly these wise men know the law, and they know how to apply it.

Verse 13. They are the seven princes, second in command in the empire. Verse number 14. And the king's question even reveals that he understands the political nature of this.

He asks, verse 15, according to the law. See, King Ahasuerus seems to recognize the implications of Vashti's disobedience, that this looks bad for him with all of the nobles and governors and so on. But the king's cabinet doesn't seem to make this connection. Rather than addressing the pertinent issue of how Vashti's rebellion will impact support for the invasion of Greece, the king's council, chaired by Memucan, seems primarily concerned that other women in the kingdom might follow Vashti's example.

Queen Vashti didn't obey, maybe they will say, when the king said dance. So I don't have to listen to you when you say, make me a sandwich.

[14:54] Verse 18. Memucan, still talking. This very day, the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.

If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him and let it be written among the laws of the Persians in 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.

So, verse 20, 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.

This advice pleased the king and the princess. And the king did as Memucan proposed. 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.

Now, apparently, while still intoxicated, the king and his cabinet write this new law. It's in verse number 19.

[16:31] Vashti can no longer appear before the king, which is precisely what she already chose. This is like backing out of a book club and the president of the book club saying, you can't come back.

Or, it's like walking into your boss's office and saying, I quit. And your boss says, no, no, you're fired. It just doesn't work that way.

These men, these wise men, they intend to intimidate women into respecting men by proclaiming this consequence that Vashti has received in verse 20.

But, did you notice? By proclaiming Vashti's consequence, they also publicize the king's lack of integrity and abuse of power.

And, by hastily sending their new law, verse number 22, to every province and every people and every man, they ensure that everyone across the entire empire hears the embarrassing truth.

[17:46] Resistance is not futile. The king's commands can be disobeyed.

the empire strikes back and strikes out. How often is power in the hands of the ungodly and the incompetent?

how often do we see authority and wisdom dangerously disconnected from one another? I wonder if you have experienced the baffling behavior of rulers and leaders who are driven by their own fear and insecurity.

authority. Isn't it true that unchallenged authority held by self-centered, power-hungry people can feel both terrifying and disorienting?

Now, when faced with this, you could give up. Perhaps persevering under these types of circumstances isn't possible.

[19 : 12] Maybe God is not as sovereign as you once believed. You could give up. You could also give in.

Now, you might not appreciate the idea of aligning with those who abuse authority, but listen, at least it gives you a temporary sense of control.

But notice, Esther chapter 1 reveals that there is another option. Instead of giving up or giving in, you can laugh at the empire's foolishness.

Don't be enticed by the world's glory, child of God. Don't be seduced by the world's claim to power. You and I, we can reject the values, the priorities, the goals, the glory of the empire.

Reflect on Jesus' rhetorical question in Mark chapter 8. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?

[20 : 36] The answer to that question is so simple that it's laughable, isn't it? What does it profit a man? so what? Ahasuerus, if you have enough stuff to parade before the people for 180 plus seven days, so what?

If you have gained the whole world and you forfeit your soul, don't give up, don't give in, resist the emptiness of worldly power, of earthly possessions, of temporary satisfaction, resist all of that by learning to laugh at the empire's foolishness.

Esther chapter one also teaches us to consider how Christ loves the church.

Ahasuerus is self-centered and lustful. Jesus is self-sacrificing and humble.

Ahasuerus flaunts the glory of his empire for 187 days, all to make himself look like such a big deal.

[22 : 04] Jesus gives up the glory of the Father's presence and empties himself by taking the form of a servant and being born in the likeness of men.

Philippians chapter 2. Jesus doesn't exalt himself. because he is concerned about the well-being of others.

Ahasuerus shames his queen by demanding that she degrade herself for the pleasure of drunken men. Jesus endures the shame of the cross, suffers the wrath of God and lays down his life.

To what end? To present his bride to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing.

Ephesians 5. Ahasuerus demands that his queen respect him and submit to his authority. Jesus dies on the cross and draws his bride, the church, to himself.

[23 : 27] How? By his love, by his mercy, by his gentleness, by his grace. grace. Isn't Jesus lovely?

Oh, dear friend, dear young one, let me ask you, what more could Jesus do to win your heart today? What more could Jesus do to win your heart today?

Consider how Christ loves the church and do not be misled. God calls husbands to love their wives like Jesus loves the church.

Husbands, do not use your wife to satisfy your own desires. Don't treat her like her primary purpose is making you look good.

Don't exchange loving your wife for a faux authority that demands her submission. Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 25, husbands, love your wife as Christ loved the church.

[25 : 01] lay down your life for her. Not just physically. I think that we short this verse when we think about laying down your life for her as though, oh yeah, if there was some emergency, I'd be willing to take the bullet, I'd be willing to stand up for her.

I don't think that that fully helps us grasp what laying down your life for her means. It is not just physically doing so, but practically doing so.

What does it mean to lay down your life for your wife practically every day? What does that mean? Choose her.

Cherish her. Honor her. Tend to her emotions. Cultivate her growth in Christ likeness.

Nourish her faith in Jesus. Replenish her hope in God's promises. Grow her gifts. Help her glorify God by fulfilling his calling on her life.

[26 : 22] Church, this is what our head Jesus does for his bride. And this is God's calling on you, my brother, as head of your wife.

Esther one teaches us to laugh at the empire and to consider how Christ loves the church. And finally, Esther one teaches us to see God's action even when he seems absent. is it possible for God's people to survive when they are forcibly removed from their land?

Is it possible for God's people to survive when you take away their forms of worship, destroy their temple? Is it possible for God's people to survive when you surround them with idolatry and an unholy culture?

Is it possible for God's people to survive when you subject them to powerful malicious rulers? What about when you remove God's law and even God's name from among them?

[27 : 49] Can God's people survive that? And the answer to these questions is yes. And Esther is that story.

even though there are no miracles, at least not the type that we expect to see like in the book of Exodus, even though there are no prophets speaking on God's behalf, even though there are no shining examples of holiness, even when God's name isn't mentioned, Vashti's banishment from the king's presence was not an accident or a coincidence, God did that.

God did that so that there would need to be a search for a new queen. God is present even when he seems absent.

And the seeming absence of God in the book of Esther is the real genius of the book. Here's why. Because it gives us hope for today.

Because we live like that under ungodly and incompetent leaders. Where authority is often held by self-centered, power-hungry rulers, and life can feel both terrifying and disorienting.

[29 : 28] And miracles, at least the kind we read about in the Bible, are so rare. And God's kingdom, and God's name, and God's people, are often reviled and rejected.

Esther 1 teaches us to see God's action even when he seems absent. God is always working for his glory and the good of his people.

King Hasuerus' 187-day party, parading his wealth, his splendor, his glory before all of the nobles and the governors, in order to get them to go with him to war.

It must have been a truly extraordinary experience. My brothers and sisters, we look forward to an even bigger, better, and longer banquet.

the marriage supper of the lamb. Our groom, the Lord Jesus, will lift our veil, wipe our tears away, and honorably show off his bride as a trophy of grace for all eternity.

[31 : 19] This is our hope. This is our hope when the empire strikes back.

Let's pray. Let's Thank you.