

Sermon 1: Esther 1:1-9: Introduction to Esther

OUTLINE

Power
Wealth
Control

INTRODUCTION

Why preach from the book of Esther? We could answer, because it is in the Word of God and that would be enough. But we are doing a deep dive into Esther because we have been studying the Providence of God, that is how our glorious God brings His good will to pass, despite apparent set-backs, evil prospering, His people being down trodden, His people not always being their holiest, and there being no sign of the miracles and power we see in so many stories in the Bible. The reason the book of Esther is so important is because it reads like so many of our lives. Just think about some of the parallels. The Jews had been exiled to Babylon and returned. Esther and Mordecai are still exiles, part of what is called the Dispersion. Like us they were away from Home; living in a hostile world; a religious minority under powers that were rules unto themselves. What is striking about the book of Esther is that there are no real heroes, only ordinary people. In fact there seems to be all sorts of moral compromises that we would not find in other exiles like Daniel and his friends. Esther enters a beauty competition at the behest of her uncle to join a harem. This feels more like exiles who have been over-integrated into the surrounding culture and are imperfectly living out their faith; rather than the sterling examples of Daniel and his friends who avoided meat in case it was offered to idols Dan. 1:8-16. We are about 50-60 years after the exiles went back to Israel and we are into several generations of those who did not return to the land and chose to live in exile rather than return. Yet we will see that God uses the ordinary and imperfect to bring His will to pass. Most striking about the book of Esther is the apparent absence of God. There are no miracles like the 10 plagues or the parting of the Red Sea; yet it is clear that God is using ordinary people and ordinary means despite their weak position to bring His will to pass.

The book of Esther has also been problematic for these and other reasons. We have noted Esther and Mordecai's willingness for Esther to join a Harem; and then there is the request for the Jews to have another day to put their enemies to death 9:13. It is the only book of the Bible where God's name is not present; there is no mention of the temple, Israel, explicit prayer (though I think fasting implies it). And many have found it difficult to see how it points to Christ. It had no commentators in the church for the first 7 centuries; and Luther wanted to exclude it from the Bible, 'Martin Luther denounced this book together with the apocryphal 2 Maccabees, saying of them, "I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities."¹ Modern Scholars however are totally convinced of Esther usefulness and part in God's redemptive plan. The Bible begins with a promise of a struggle between the Seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, a cosmic war that has raged throughout time. We see evidence of it when Pharaoh kills the Jewish male children; when Herod slays the infants in Bethlehem. Esther is another chapter and another stage on which this

1 Karen H. Jobes, [Esther](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 21.

drama unfolds. There is Haman the Agagite who wants to destroy the Jews and wants to turn the hands of power to do his will; but God has put Esther and Mordecai in place as a means to rescue His people. The future of the people of God, and with them the birth of the Messiah hangs in the balance. What is so helpful for us is how God's victory comes, it does not come through miracles and heroes and an obvious outcome. God seems absent; the doom of God's people seems imminent; the people God uses seem so weak and not your usual hero material; like so many of the situations of our lives there is a real sense of tension, of a possibility of failure, yet God is working. And perhaps this is one of the greatest lessons for us. That God is present when He seems hidden; that His strength is made perfect through weakness.

Today we begin the book of Esther and it opens with a vulgar display of power and wealth and control. It perfectly sets the scene for how we as the people of God often have to live our lives. The plans of God come to pass as the people of God live under godless and powerful governments who wield law and wealth as a whip and a temptation, all the while controlling even the smallest details of our lives giving an impression of sovereignty. But we know how the story ends. We always approach these situations knowing who is really in control and whose will will ultimately come to pass. We will be introducing the book looking at 1:1-9 under the three headings of power, wealth and control.

Power

V1, 'Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.' Let us put things into historical context. We have a king, the ESV calls him Ahasuerus; other translations have Xerxes. He was the Persian king Khshayarshan which means king over heroes; which in Greek was transliterated into Xerxes; which in Hebrew was transliterated into Ahasuerus pronounced Ahashwerosh. Some suspect a little mockery in the name as it literally translates into something like 'king headache'. He was king of Persia from Nov. 486 BC where he became king at the age of 32 and was assassinated in 465 BC. The relevant aspect of the story begin in 586 BC when Babylon takes the Southern tribes into exile destroying Jerusalem and the temple. God was punishing His people in accordance with the curses of the Mosaic Covenant found in Deut. 28 for their idolatry and sin. God however had a plan to preserve His people and to restore them to the land. This was promised in place like Jer. 30:3. God did this through the Persian king Cyrus II or Cyrus the Great. Daniel 5 records how Belshazzar was in a drunken revelry when Cyrus invaded. Cyrus established the boundaries of the Persian Empire in a band from Pakistan (India) in the East to N. Sudan (Ethiopia) in the East. We are told that at this time, and the number would change that he ruled over 127 provinces. The Persian Empire would reign for 200 years until the rise of Alexander the Great. Cyrus is important to us because he was used by God to return the Jews from exile and even paid for the rebuilding of the temple. This is where the book of Ezra begins, 1:1, 'In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also put it in writing.' More importantly though he is the only pagan king to receive the title 'anointed' and foreshadow the Messiah, Is. 44:28-45:1, 'who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid. Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and to loose the belts of kings, to open doors before

him that gates may not be closed.’ Ezra and Nehemiah record how Israel rebuilt under the shadow of the Persian empire. The book of Esther is about 50 years later.

Ahasuerus is the son of Darius I who helped Zerubbabel rebuild the temple. Darius was famous for a failed attempt to invade Greece. Ahasuerus is the one famous for carrying on his father’s attempt to invade Greece, but ultimately failing. You will know him best as the king who overcame Sparta’s 300. The Greek historian Herodotus informs us that the feast of 180 days recorded here in Esther was for the purpose of convincing people to support him in his attempt to invade Greece. Another famous story is how he ordered the water whipped 300 times in a temper tantrum when bad weather arose to damage the bridges he was going to use to invade Greece.

What we need to see is this. Ahasuerus is just another king, at the head of the then world power who God will use to execute His plan and preserve His people. God used Nebuchadnezzar to do His will in disciplining Israel; then Persia to punish Babylon and release the exiles and support the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple; now we will observe how another king is in the Lord’s hands despite the power and authority that he seems to unquestioningly wield. Greece; Rome, no matter who is in power God is ultimately in control.

V2, ‘in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel.’ Susa was one of four capitals in the Persian empire, it was the winter capital and is also mentioned in Dan. 8:2 and Nehemiah 1:1.

Wealth

V3-4, ‘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.’ The Persian Empire united with the Median Empire under Cyrus and was the dominant partner, hence it is rightly named first. Jonah had prophesied the downfall of the Assyrian capital of Nineveh, it was the Medes as part of a Media-Babylonian alliance that finally overcame Nineveh. Ahasuerus is reigning in power; and he is in the 3rd year of his reign. He throws a feast and calls for all the nobles, all the generals, all the governors together in a show of wealth and power. You should have two responses as you read the detail here. Firstly, you should be aghast at the show of wealth and power, it is an inordinate, irresponsible and frankly purely symbolic show of excess. Secondly, because this is written sometime after these events, history will have revealed that this feast was for the purpose of Ahasuerus raising support for his war on Greece, which he lost and was down the line subsequently assassinated.

But one 180 days party is not enough, every good party should also have an after party, a seven day after party, v5, ‘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.’ What follows is detail which is unknown in the Bible apart from descriptions of things like the temple, v6-7, ‘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.'

Now we all secretly want to be rich. We love to look inside rich people's houses, their garages, their yachts, their wardrobes, their lives. Yet we also reel back on our heels at some of the excess we see. Be it Melania Trump's \$100 000 wedding dress; or Ivanka Trump's 13 layer wedding cake which cost \$70 000; or the wedding of Charles and Diana is estimated at \$48 million. The sad reality is that money does not buy happiness, it does not buy love, it does not buy security, it does not mean you get to keep the kingdom. The marriage of Charles and Diana lasted only 15 years. Yet the illusion of happiness, security, power, success all being linked to wealth is an illusion we all have to labor under. The Jewish exiles who lived in Persia who would have looked at this excessive and lavish display would have to remind themselves of the truth, Ecc. 5:10-15, 'He who loves money will not be satisfied with money, nor he who loves wealth with his income; this also is vanity. ¹¹ When goods increase, they increase who eat them, and what advantage has their owner but to see them with his eyes? ¹² Sweet is the sleep of a laborer, whether he eats little or much, but the full stomach of the rich will not let him sleep. There is a grievous evil that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owner to his hurt, ¹⁴ and those riches were lost in a bad venture. And he is father of a son, but he has nothing in his hand. ¹⁵ As he came from his mother's womb he shall go again, naked as he came, and shall take nothing for his toil that he may carry away in his hand.' These Jewish exiles would be wiser than the richest man in the world, which would have been Ahasuerus who ruled the then world power.

As exiles we have the teaching of Christ reminding us that we can gain the whole world and lose our souls. That our treasure is in heaven and not on earth. Many would look at Ahasuerus's wealth with envy, all we see is golden handcuffs.

Control

V8-9, '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.' To top off what outwardly looks like a perfect picture of power and wealth is this detail about an edict relating to drinking. The drink was free and you did not have to drink if you did not want to. At first this might seem like such a magnanimous gesture because the King is allowing you to make up your own mind about how much you drink. But the very fact that this comes as a concession and is highlighted by the author shows that this is probably a criticism done tongue-in-cheek.

Here was a king who was controlling, so controlling that even the small details of our lives come under his power. As exiles who live under this world's governments who often have all sorts of laws limiting our actions in all sorts of ways, we can relate to living under controlling authorities. But all of this window dressing of power, wealth and control is put forward as a backdrop to the one who is truly sitting on the throne. The wealthiest and most powerful man in the world who had the power to legislate to the smallest aspects of our lives. There really is no greater human tool that could do so much damage to the cause of God. We can apply this to our problems today. Who is the most powerful tech giant, the most powerful media outlet, the most threatening communist power, the most liberal power, who has the power to shape our lives and be a threat to

the gospel and the church? This is character number 1 who is rolled out, and what an impressive character he is. He seems to rule and shape reality everywhere he goes, all seems to be at his mercy. Yet we will see Prov. 21:1, 'The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.'

How do we find Christ in this text? Well, the text is part of a greater narrative that will result in the rescue of God's people which will result in Christ. But there is another way of seeing Christ in this text and it is by way of contrast. Many have pointed out that Ahasuerus and Christ are set as opposites. Both are the most powerful of kings, both have an international empire. Both are rich. Yet Ahasuerus cannot hold onto his power and his wealth, all will be stripped from him in death. The banquet he throws would have been a terrible strain on the servants and have resulted in harsh taxes to fill up the treasury afterwards, coming at the cost of the people not their benefit. He is an insecure and demanding king who is a bad husband who casts off his wife for disobeying one bad command. But then there is Christ, undying, who is the true King and owner of all. He spreads a banquet and invites all from the greatest to the least to come. He is good and provides the banquet at His own expense and serves us Himself. We cannot help but think of Christ's words to His disciples, Mark 10:42-45, 'And Jesus called them to him and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' And He has served us by bringing us into His kingdom which will never fail.

Esther begins a story that involves the most powerful man in the world being used as a tool by Satan to stamp out the people of God. But we will see that just as God preserved his people, He preserves us, and through His powerful yet hidden working His good purposes come to pass.