

The Great King

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 29 September 2019

Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] I've spoken with many people over the years who have said some version of the same thing. They said, you know, if Jesus would just come and appear to me, then I would believe in him.

If I could be like Moses or David and see a burning bush or hear the voice of God, then I would believe. If God would enact some kind of a miracle for me to witness, then I would have faith. And, you know, if I'm totally honest, I've felt the same thing. I've wished for the same thing. That God might somehow demonstrate his presence to me in a way that I could see or hear or touch. And it's a very real question. How do you believe in a God that you can't see? How do you believe in a God that you cannot hear? How do you believe in a God that you can't touch? Moreover, how can you possibly consider trusting such a God? Trusting such a God enough that you would give your life to that God?

[1 : 07] I think it's a very real question. And this is a question that we're going to be considering together over the next couple of months as we look at a little book in the Old Testament called the book of Esther. Esther is amazing for a lot of reasons.

But one of the main reasons we're going to be looking at it is because unlike many of the other books of the Bible, in Esther, God is never mentioned a single time.

Never mentioned. No voice of God. No divine sword-wielding messenger of God. Nobody walks on water. No miraculous healings of lepers or curing of blindness or raising people from the dead. None of those things happen in Esther. And yet, as we'll see over the next couple of months, God is everywhere in this story. It is saturated with God's presence for those who have the eyes to see Him.

And, you know, Esther, this young woman, unlikely character, is one of the greatest examples of faithfulness we have in Scripture.

[2 : 17] So today what we're going to do is we're going to look at Esther chapter 1, and we're going to go through Esther chapter 2, verse 8. And this section that we're going to be looking at is sort of, it sets the scene.

There are three events that happen in this section of the story that sort of set in motion all of the subsequent events that will unfold.

So we're going to look at these three events. We're going to see a king boast. So the king boasts. A queen takes a stand. And then finally we're going to meet a mysterious young girl who doesn't even come into the story until chapter 2.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word. And every week we confess that our desire is very often to put your word on the table and to parse it out and to analyze it and to dissect it and to try to explain it.

But Lord, what we most need, what I most need from you is to be the one on the table, to be the one who is analyzed, to be the one who is dissected.

[3 : 31] And Lord, we need your word to explain it. And Lord, we need your word to explain us to ourselves. Because we know that unlike any other book, this book can. It can explain our hearts to us.

And that more than that, it can reveal your son to us. And that's what we most need. In your son's name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. So, let's look at the opening of Esther.

And we're going to see this boastful, vain, pompous king. The year is 483 B.C. And we meet a king right off the bat.

It's interesting that the author starts with this king, King Ahasuerus. He's also known in history as King Xerxes. So, if you're familiar with the somewhat fictionalized movie 300 about the Battle of Thermopylae and King Leonidas, the villain in that movie, Xerxes, is actually a real historical figure.

It's the same person, King Ahasuerus, also known as King Xerxes. And we're probably going to use those names interchangeably throughout the course of this series. But at this point, this king is the most powerful man on earth.

[4 : 42] He's the ruler of the Medo-Persian Empire. And he's just returned from a massive military campaign. And he's at Susa. And Susa is the luxurious citadel and home of the Persian royalty.

It's an unimaginably beautiful, luxurious, wealthy place full of gold and silver and jewels and wealth of all kinds. And this king is all about flexing his wealth and power.

He wants everybody to know how wealthy and powerful he is. And so, he invites officials from all over his kingdom. I say invites. I'm assuming it was more of a compulsion that they come.

But he wants people from all over his kingdom to come to Susa where it says in verse 4, he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days.

And if you're picking up on a little sarcasm there, you're exactly right. This is one of those great places in the Bible where you see that what we're getting in Scripture is not just a historical account.

This is art.

[5 : 50] This is a work of literature. And the author of Esther is brilliant at sarcasm and dramatic reversals. And right off the bat, we get a sense of this author's almost kind of mocking tone toward this king, the splendor and pomp of his greatness.

This is a six-month festival of self-aggrandizement. And to cap it all off, he throws a week-long drinking party with a round-the-clock open bar.

And, you know, that can only lead to good things. And so, on the last day of this sort of binge-drinking party, it says the heart of the king is merry with wine.

That's a nice euphemism. I think we probably know what that means. He's feeling very merry at this point. And he's already showed off his gold and his silver and his gourmet food and his yachts.

He showed everything off. There's one thing that he has yet to bring out to impress all of his drunk friends. His wife. And so, he gets this great idea to send seven of his eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti.

[7 : 02] And let's just be clear about this. This is not so that they can meet Queen Vashti or even hear her speak. This is purely so that Queen Vashti can be presented and stared at by a bunch of drunk, rich men.

And I think we need to pause here and just sort of reflect on the fact that King Ahasuerus is almost presented to us as a caricature.

Right? There's a tone of sarcasm and mockery from the author. We're seeing already the author's not taking him very seriously. And so, it's easy for us to not take him very seriously.

To roll our eyes and be like, what a ridiculous character. And move on with the story. But I think it's worth reflecting on this king a little more deeply. I mean, here's a man who has it all.

He has all of the sex and money and power he could possibly imagine. He lives on a level of luxury beyond anything we can possibly imagine.

[8 : 05] And so, the question that arises is, why is he trying so hard? You know, what's he trying to prove? Why compel people from all over your kingdom to come and tell you how great you are?

Why bring out all of this luxury and wealth just to earn the affirmation of these people who all technically work for you? What is the impulse in the human heart that drives that kind of behavior? You know, it's easy to distance ourselves from this. But I would say it's probably very similar to the impulse that drives us to count how many likes we get on social media.

Right? Maybe it's a difference of scale. But not of essence. You know, I think there's something in the human heart that wants affirmation.

That wants to know a sense of our own worth. It's the same impulse that drives us to relentlessly compare ourselves to other people. You know, when we look at other people's careers, or other people's kitchens, or other people's children, or other people's marriages, or other people's bodies, or other people's exciting lives.

[9 : 25] Because it's almost impossible, especially in this day and age where you are presented with pictures of idealized bodies and idealized vacations and idealized living rooms.

It's almost impossible not to compare. And the thing is, when you have an unchecked impulse in you, like this, an unchecked impulse toward self-aggrandizement, toward self-exaltation, and then you put such a person in a position of power, they can do an enormous amount of damage.

Václav Havel, first president of the Czech Republic, is an incredibly thoughtful leader. Was an amazing man in many ways.

And he gave a lot of great speeches and did a lot of great writing. But one of the speeches that has always left its mark on me, he was receiving an award and he was giving this acceptance speech as he received the award.

And in this speech, he's very honest about his own position, and he's very honest about the temptations of power, in particular political power. Because he says all of us have this thing in us, this desire for existential affirmation.

[10:46] For somebody to point at you and say, you are worthy, you're the best, you're amazing. And he says, when you know that is in you as a human being, it's easy to begin to use your power to gain more and more and more existential affirmation.

And he points to that as the root of many of the evils that we've seen throughout history. Leaders who have done enormous amounts of damage to the people that they propose to serve.

He says this near the end of his speech. Politics is an area of human endeavor that places greater stress on moral sensitivity, on the ability to reflect critically on oneself, on genuine responsibility, on taste and tact, on the capacity to empathize with others, on a sense of moderation, on humility.

It is a job for modest people, for people who cannot be deceived, and by that he means self-deceived. These are the kind of leaders we need to be electing in our country.

Don't just pay attention to policy. These are the kind of leaders that we need to seek to become. So that's the king and his brash proposal.

[12:06] Moving on in the story, we see this wonderful queen. And if there's anything that I wish we had more of in Esther, it would be more about Queen Vashti. We just see a little bit of her, but what we see is very intriguing.

The king sends seven eunuchs to fetch the queen. Now, I'm not sure why it took seven. What it suggests to me is that maybe they weren't on the best of terms. And he says, you know, maybe you should all go and bring her, right?

But he's seen seven eunuchs to fetch the queen. And you can imagine time passing. You know, no Vashti. More time passes. You can imagine all of his friends are sort of starting to shuffle their feet and clear their throats.

And everybody's kind of waiting for the queen to appear. It's starting to get awkward. And the king is sort of nervously looking at the door and drumming his fingers on the table and waiting.

And after an awkwardly long time, the eunuchs sort of slink back in. And they sheepishly whispered to the king, Vashti's not coming.

[13:09] And you can almost imagine the wine sort of spraying out of his mouth. What? You know, it's a kind of absurd moment. But it's a great moment. Because we see Queen Vashti refusing to be objectified.

She says, I'm not going to participate in this. She refuses to allow herself to be treated like a piece of meat. And, of course, you don't have to know much about history to know she's doing so at tremendous risk to herself.

Right? But she does it. She refuses. And it's clear that this comes as a major shock to King Ahasuerus. And so this would have been a massive embarrassment.

He's got all of his friends there, all these people he's trying to impress. And they say, the queen's not coming. And so he does it. It's sort of funny. You can imagine he sort of looks around, has no idea what to do. And so he calls his advisors together and basically says, what do we do?

You know? What laws are the, how do you, you know, what does the law book say? You know? And it's this comic moment.

[14:11] And, again, you know, the more I study it, the more I think that Esther is a kind of historical dark comedy. And, and so what's so funny about this is that these advisors, they say, well, that isn't the real issue.

Yeah, Vashti, that's an issue. But there's a much bigger issue at stake. And that is the fact that once word gets out that Vashti has disobeyed you, next thing you know, all of the wives throughout the kingdom, they're all going to be disobeying their husbands.

It's going to be total anarchy. And so they say, we've got to lock this thing down right now. And so they say, they tell the king, you have to do two things. Number one, you have to get rid of Vashti. Now, thankfully, that doesn't mean killing her, but it does mean banishing her to the harem where

she will never be seen or heard from again.

Get rid of Vashti and get a better wife, a better queen. But number two, we need to pass a law that makes it a federal crime for women to disobey their husbands. It's utterly ridiculous.

And you hear that and you say, that's horrible. It is horrible. But I think the author also makes us, is wanting almost to make us roll our eyes. All of these men scrambling, right?

[15:18] Make it a federal offense to disobey your husband. And here, I think we see the first signs of something really important. And it's kind of the beginnings of a central theme in the book of Esther.

And it begins to raise the question, maybe this king isn't as all-powerful as he first appears. When we first see him, it's this jaw-dropping description of luxury and power.

We are meant to be in awe. I've never seen a leader like this. And many would have looked at him as a god. Maybe he's not a god. Maybe he's not as all-powerful as he appears.

I mean, anyone in leadership, most of you already know this, anyone in leadership knows that if you have to demand respect, you've probably already lost it. Already in chapter 1, the tide is beginning to turn, which begs the question, who is really in control?

Who's really calling the shots? And before I say more about that, I just want to look briefly at the third character, who's the mysterious young girl. Some time passes between chapters 1 and 2, and we're not really told this in the Scripture, but we know from history that during this several-year period, Xerxes, Ahasuerus, launches this massive military campaign against Greece.

[16:46] And in his pride, he greatly underestimated how hard it would be to conquer Greece. And so he eventually suffers a humiliating defeat and loses his entire navy and has to return home in shame.

And he's dejected and he's miserable. Historians tell us that during this period, he was drinking an enormous amount. He was fraternizing with the wives of some of his officials, and that behavior sowed the seeds for what eventually led to his assassination.

But he's not in a good place. And so his attendants are saying, you know, we've got to get him out of this funk. We've got to cheer him up. And so they cook up this idea to have a kind of empire-wide beauty contest where they will appoint officials in all of the provinces, and they will essentially compel young, beautiful, virgin women all to come to Susa for this beauty contest.

And what this essentially means is that they're forcing these women to come so that Xerxes, Ahasuerus, can choose a new queen to replace Vashti.

And I just want to say, this was really awful. They were taking these young women, many of them, you know, most all of them teenagers, and they're forcing them to leave their homes in the towns where they grew up, and they're making them come to the citadel, and they will then be sent to essentially prostitute school.

[18:16] And once they are deemed ready, they will go and spend one night with the king. And then most likely after that one night, they will then go to the harem of all of the other women who have spent one night with the king, and there they will remain for the rest of their lives.

They will never be able to leave. They will never be able to have families of their own. They will remain sort of captive members of the harem. So this is a horrible thing that's happening. But it just so happens, and you're going to hear that a lot in the book of Esther, it just so happens that one of the young women chosen is Esther.

And I want to hold off saying too much about her until next week. Next week we'll begin to really get to know her as a character. But all I want to say this week is that Esther is the very picture of vulnerability and weakness, which is very important for the story.

She is young, probably 14 or 15. She's a young girl in this kind of patriarchal world.

She has no parents. We don't know what happened to them. We just know they're not in the picture. They're probably dead. And she's being raised by her cousin. And we also know that she's a Jew. But she's a Jew who's living in hiding.

[19:29] She's living undercover. At this point in history, the exile had ended. Some of the Jewish people had returned to Jerusalem to begin the rebuilding. But many Jews remained dispersed throughout the Persian Empire.

And we find out that Esther is actually living right there at Susa, in the shadow of the citadel. And yet she's living undercover for fear of persecution.

And yet what God's about to do is to pull Esther, this most unlikely picture of vulnerability person, into the very heart of the Persian government.

So this is our first glimpse of something that we're going to come back to again and again and again, probably every week in this series.

And that is the idea of God's providence. And by God's providence, I mean God's work of sustaining and governing the universe. And this is one of the main ways that we experience God in our lives.

[20 : 34] Even though we cannot see Him or hear Him or touch Him, we see His presence. We see the work of His hands. We see events unfolding in ways that reflect God's will in our lives.

And this raises, I think, for us a very important question as we look at this opening chapter. How do we make sense of the fact that there are morally reprehensible things happening in this story, and yet this is ultimately a story of God's providence?

Right? So when the king demands that Queen Vashti allow herself to be stared at by his drunk friends, when they compel young women to become part of the harem, these are morally reprehensible acts.

These are horrible things to do to other human beings. And yet at the same time, these are key events in the unfolding story of God's plan. And how do we reconcile those things?

And the answer is simply God's providence. Because God's providence goes way beyond anything you're going to find in other philosophies or religions.

[21 : 50] So if you look at all the other philosophies and religions, there are some that group together along the lines of determinism or fatalism. In other words, there are a whole group of perspectives that say more or less that the end is fixed, and that ultimately our choices really don't matter, that our fate is set, it's determined, and what happens in our lives will happen despite the choices that we make.

So no matter what we do, we cannot escape fate. So think of the story of Oedipus. Right? Oedipus is told at the beginning of the story that he is fated to kill his father and marry his mother.

He's told his fate. And yet the entire story, he's doing everything he can to avoid that fate. But at the very end of the story, in the end, he kills his father and he marries his mother.

That's fatalism. That's determinism. There's a whole other group of perspectives that say the opposite. They say our choices are the things that determine the outcome.

And this is the set of perspectives that say we need to take control of our destiny. We are the ones who determine our destiny. Our choices will make the difference of where we end up ultimately.

And so what happens in your life is entirely the result of the choices that you make.

[23 : 12] And the idea flows out of that. If we were to make different choices, we would lead to different outcomes. Right? So think of the movie Back to the Future. I don't, hopefully most of you at least know about that movie.

It's an old movie by today's standards. But Back to the Future was built around the idea that you could go back in time, make different choices, and that those choices would dramatically shape the future that unfolded.

Right? So that's that set of perspectives. So the first set of perspectives says our destiny is determined despite our choices. The end is fixed. It doesn't matter what you do. The second says our destiny is determined because of our choices.

God's providence is both and neither. God's providence is far more beautiful, far more nuanced, far more balanced than any perspective you're ever going to see in any other philosophy of religion.

Because what the Bible says is that God has such control over history, and yet He is so intimately involved in our lives that our destiny is determined through our choices.

[24 : 20] Through our choices. So on the one hand, our choices matter. Our choices shape the future as it unfolds.

Our choices do have an impact, and we are responsible for the choices that we make. But on the other hand, God is directing courses and outcomes.

God is weaving everything together like a great tapestry in history. So what this tells us is that you can have a king like King Ahasuerus who seems like he has absolute power.

You look at him and he seems like he's a god. And he calls someone like Esther into what seems like a hopeless situation. And yet we know that two things are true simultaneously.

Number one, the king is doing wicked things that run completely against God's desire for human life. That is true.

[25 : 20] These are wicked acts. But number two, God can repurpose these evil things and use them for His own good, loving, and just purposes.

And the two are true at the same time. And what this means, to put it simply, evil will never have the final word. Evil will never have the last say in our destiny, in our life.

Right? So whatever suffering you may be facing right now, whatever hardship is gripping your heart and your soul, we always know that because of God's providence, this is not the last chapter of your life.

This is not the end. This is not how it will turn out. But with God, evil can do its worst. But it will always be overcome by good.

And whatever it is that keeps you up at night, you know, whatever obstacle keeps you awake, whatever broken relationship haunts you, whatever situation feels hopeless to you, right, as hopeless as Esther might have felt, with God there is no such thing as a hopeless situation.

[26 : 44] Because God is a God of providence. And of course, the greatest example of all of this is the cross. Right? Because when Jesus came, the world saw for the first time her true king.

But this king is not like any of the kings of the world. He's nothing like King Ahasuerus. He's nothing like any king or leader we've ever seen.

Instead of exalting himself at the expense of his people, he humbled himself, allowed himself to be executed for the sake of his people.

And the cross, when you look at it, seems like the worst act ever committed, the ultimate evil act.

And here's the mind-bending truth. It was. It was evil.

It was the worst act of evil ever committed. And yet, simultaneously, it's the greatest act of good ever achieved. It was God's way to set us free from all of the things that enslave us.

[27 : 47] It was God's way to make it possible to be adopted and become his children. So it was truly evil and truly good. Defeat and victory at the same time.

And the most important thing that the cross shows us about God is not just how his providence works.

It's that God loves us. I mean, think about that. The God who provides for and sustains and governs every molecule of this universe loves you.

He loves you. And what that means is that this is not just a God that you can believe in, but this is a God whom you can trust.

Let's pray.