

The Greatest Party Ever

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[0 : 00] Esther chapter 1, page 490 in the ESV, Esther chapter 1.

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 capital, 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, 180 days.

A couple of weeks ago, I went to a party. It was a very special evening. The party was a very special party because it was to celebrate the birthday of a very special friend of mine. There's all kinds of reasons why you might want to have a party. Birthdays are one of them. Weddings are another.

Retirements are another. Some people have parties at Christmas time when they have their friends around, they have a dinner and so on and so forth. Normally, a party, whatever the reason for it, will last maybe an evening, perhaps a day if it's a wedding, perhaps the whole day if you're really stretching it. And parties, as I say, can be for any variety of reasons.

I wonder what the most expensive party that ever was thrown in the world has been. You look up the internet and you come across some pretty lavish ones, but they all seem to take place in Hollywood or amongst royalty, amongst the rich and the famous in the world. I think it was President Tan Shwe, who is the former or who was the notorious former president of Burma, who spent 80 million dollars on the wedding of his daughter. And that's one thing in a rich country, but in a country where many of your people are literally starving to death, it is an outrage. I guess that there have been lavish parties thrown throughout the centuries, many of them lasting more than a day, two days, three days, maybe a week.

[3 : 06] But I reckon this one takes the biscuit. This party lasted for 180 days. Do you know how long that is? That is six months.

It's hard to believe, isn't it? It really is. These guys obviously knew how to try to have a good time. And I say try. I was tempted to say these guys knew how to have a good time, but in actual fact, they didn't have a good time. I guess there were times, I guess that it started off well, but it ended up in tears and anger and bitterness and misery at the end. That's what happens when you think life is about your own pleasure. So you might say, well, what in the world was the occasion for this great party? Was it a wedding? Was it a birthday? Well, thankfully, the chapter tells us the occasion was simply this, so that he could show his pomp and his greatness and his royal glory.

It was a demonstration, if you like, for the benefit of the many generals and nobles and officials and government employees in his vast empire to come. No doubt they didn't all stay for six months. No doubt some of them came for maybe one month and went away again and others would come. I'm not sure how it happened or how it worked. But I am sure of what the purpose of this great feast was, perhaps I should take a moment to explain where we're at in world history here.

We're in the Persian Empire and we're in a city called Susa. Strangely, you can still go there today and you can still actually, between Susa and Persimung, you can actually see some relics which are left to this day from this very empire. It's in Iran, if you're brave enough or if you can afford to go there. The Persian Empire was founded by Cyrus the Great in 557 BC. And then he conquered Babylon, which of course was made famous in the Bible by Nebuchadnezzar. And he conquered Babylon in 539.

Now this Cyrus wasn't just a great political military king, he was a biblical king because God had a plan for him. God had promised that he was the one who would allow the Jewish people to return home to Jerusalem after spending 70 years in captivity. By 539, the Jewish people had spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon. And sure enough, on the button, on the dot, Cyrus came to the throne and one of the first things he did was he issued a decree allowing the Jewish people to go home to Jerusalem. Now that's incredible, isn't it? It's one of the most remarkable prophecies in the Old Testament, which not only you see made, but see fulfilled. God always keeps his promises.

[6 : 43] But Cyrus was killed shortly afterwards by raiders and he was succeeded briefly by his son, a man called Cambyses. But Cambyses died soon after taking the throne and a relative had to take over.

And this man was called Darius. Not the Darius in Daniel, but Darius the First or Darius the Great. And he was one of the most extraordinary. He was the one who took the empire to its limit.

This man was a superpower. The empire was a superpower. And it extended from what we call east, the west of India, all the way through to Egypt and even part of Greece. This was a mighty, mighty empire. He died while preparing an army to invade Greece, or what was then the rest of Greece, and his son Xerxes, or Ahasuerus, succeeded him. This is the man we're looking at in the book. He was the son of Darius the First. And he began to reign in 480 BC, and he reigned between 480 and reigned 22 years and died in 465. 40% of the world's population at that time were found in the Persian Empire.

It covered Iran, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Kuwait, Egypt, Libya, Turkey, Cyprus, part of Greece, Macedonia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Kyrgyzstan, Afghanistan, parts of North Arabia, and some parts of northwest India and Pakistan. That is a vast empire. It's a vast empire on the world stage.

And it was an empire that played huge significance in the history as God worked things out for his people and for his own purposes. Now, here's the bit. Ahasuerus' father—we'll not go into the difference between Ahasuerus and whether it's right to call him Xerxes or Ahasuerus. That's all to do with language. But his father Darius I, or Darius the Great, he was the one with the military skill and the might and the leadership. Ahasuerus tried to fill his shoes but just didn't quite cut it. He didn't have what it took to be the leader that his father once was. And that puts a person in a very, very awkward position when you're trying to do what your predecessor did and live up to his name and reputation, and you're trying to even further advance the Persian Empire. He failed to do so. And you're trying to exhibit—first thing I guess you have to do is to try and instill confidence in your people that you can do what your father did and that you can be just as great a leader as your father was, except he wasn't. So what do you do when you're a little bit nervous of trying to gather your people around you and trying to get the message across to them that you are the boss of the whole empire?

[10 : 32] If you can't do it naturally, you throw a party in order to win them, in order to make friends of them, and to make sure that you are their buddy and they're your buddy so that they can see your glory and your might and your royalty and your power. This was a demonstration, an exhibition, if you like, of who he was. This is him saying to all the important people in his empire, I'm the boss. So you understand how important this party is. You understand why it has to take so long.

You get the impression as you read the book of Esther, not least in this very first chapter from the very beginning, that this man has insecurities. He's got issues. We're not quite sure what these are, but he's not alone. Not everyone can do what your predecessor did. Everyone's got different qualities, different personalities. Some people are leaders, some people aren't. Some people are natural leaders, just something about them. They have a presence. They have a gravitas. They have a way of instilling confidence and asserting authority over their people. Other people don't.

The problem is, is when you're thrust into such a position and where you have to do it and you don't have the gifts for it, then you try desperately to do it. But try as he might. Sadly, this man failed.

There are people like that. I actually feel sorry for poor Ahasuerus from the very beginning. I feel sorry for him. Because I feel that he's trying so hard. He's trying too hard.

He doesn't know the Lord. So he's fumbling around trying to find himself. But someone who finds the Lord finds himself. The way to find yourself is to find the Lord. Because without him, you're lost. And here is a man who's lost. He lives in a lost world. He lives in an empire that doesn't serve the Lord. They don't know the Lord. And so they're left to fumble around in the darkness trying to make up their own laws and to do what is right in their own eyes. And to take what measures they are able to take to assert their own authority and to make things happen. Sometimes these measures work. It's like a world that has departed from God. See, it's one thing for the, it's one thing for the Persians. They had the excuse that they didn't know the Lord anyway. But what excuse do we have as a society and as a world who once knew the gospel and who have deliberately taken a step to turn our backs on the gospel and to despise it and to refuse to have anything to do with it?

[13 : 46] That doesn't bode well for the future, for any country or for any government or for any society.

And so he throws a party that lasts 180 days, six months. And at the end of this party, what do you do when the party hasn't been long enough, even after six months?

Yes. You read on verse five, 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. Now, why he felt the need to have another week-long party after spending six months celebrating is beyond me. But that's what he did. It's almost like that this man is so desperate that he can never find fulfillment. And that's what happens when you when you seek, when you live for yourself and for your own glory. And that's what he was doing.

He wasn't subordinate to anyone. And you know, when you're not subordinate to anyone, it's terribly insecure. Because for one thing, you don't know who's plotting against you. The Persian Empire was riddled with plots and factions and rebels and different parts of the empire seeking to take over the other parts and to wage war against people they didn't like. So there was all this insecurity.

That's what it's like in a world where you're not subordinate to the living and true God. But when you are and when you realize that you're accountable to God, that puts a whole different complexion on everything. Because you have to live then as someone who is accountable for the way you rule as well as for the way you live. And so here we have this man and he's in darkness. And so after this seemingly successful great party, he wants to carry on. He wants to let it carry on for another week.

[15 : 54] Let's keep going. Because he obviously felt that he couldn't go back to normal. Another thing that strikes me, and again, this is a kind of conversation through this chapter, just to give the background to the book of Esther. It's difficult to preach from it. I can only draw.

I can only draw some observations from it. And I can put them together with the rest of the Bible and try and make something of them. That's all you can do with. And that's how it fits into the scriptures.

You'll have heard people saying that God is not in Esther. There's no mention of God. That's correct. There's no mention of God in Esther. But that doesn't mean that God isn't in Esther. He most certainly is.

Because when you look back over the whole story, you can see his hand invisibly, silently, behind the scenes, working every event out so that his purpose and his plan is fulfilled and that nobody, nobody can ever go against that plan. But at the same time, there is actually a sense in which God is not in Esther.

In the sense that here is a world and an empire who are living without God. And we have an example of what the world would be like, or just a little taste of what a world is like that chooses to live without God. It's a world, as we've seen before, that is entirely insecure.

[17 : 39] We're not able to cut it because we were made for God. And we will never find a rest until we live for Him. But there's a sense in which God Himself has stepped back from such a world and has said, if you choose to live without me, then so be it. This is what's going to happen. Let's see how you get on. And so He lets, just like the Lord has given us a measure of liberty, He's given us all a measure of liberty tonight. And if you choose not to live for Him and to refuse to listen to Him, God says to us, so be it. You know, that's the most dangerous position that anyone could be in. And I hope that you never choose that course of action to live without God. Because it's living without light, it's living without forgiveness, it's living without direction. And if you choose to live without God, it's not that you're going to worship nobody, you're going to worship yourself. That's what this man did.

He did what countless other people in the world have done. He chose to worship himself. That's what he's saying to all his pals. He's saying, come and revere me. I'm going to show you my glory. Glory doesn't belong to us. Glory belongs to the Lord. And the moment we begin to begin to believe that we are somehow elevated and glorious and superior and better, then we lose sight of what we're here for.

And there's no satisfaction in it. So the party becomes a six-month-in-a-week party. And I wonder what would have happened at the end of the week if it hadn't ended so disastrously, as disastrously as it did. Not only was he seeking pleasure, but he was seeking to draw attention to the riches of his kingdom. Mother of peril. These are massively expensive items. Couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement. No expense spared. Everything was on show. You just close your eyes and you think you're in some celebrity pad. No, it's far better than that. Far, far more lavish than that. Marble, mother of peril. And drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds. The royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king, and drinking was according to this edict. There is no compulsion.

You know, there's something hilariously ironic in that, isn't there? Do you notice? And those of you who haven't read the book of Esther, and if you intend, I hope you do intend to follow through this, you have to read it for yourself. But one of the things that comes across in the Persian Empire was that everything was micromanaged. There was a law for everything. There's an authority in every single step of the process, so obsessed were they about their own laws, their own regulations. Their regulations extended into everything. The laws of the Medes and the Persians could not be revoked. That's what we're told. Could not be revoked. And here is a man who's not only trying to achieve his own glory, but he's also stamping, trying to stamp his own authority. He's a control freak. He thinks that because he's the king and the emperor, that he has to, that everything he does and everything that takes place has to have a law behind it. Even to the point where in his feast, there's a law that says there's no law about drinking.

There's a law that says anybody can drink what they want. And that's what happens when you step outside of God's law, which the psalmist tells us is like honey. It's sweet. It's great to live under God's law. The New Testament, James tells us that God's law is the law of liberty. In other words, if you live for God through Jesus, you're set free, because you live within the constraints that he sets before you for your happiness and for your joy in him.

[21 : 58] You've given, if you choose to live for the Lord tonight, rather than living for yourself, then you're set free from having to make up your own way of living and trying to fumble around in the darkness and trying to do what's right in your own eyes and you'll never succeed. You'll never succeed.

So even drinking was regulated. It wasn't regulated in the way that we think drinking is regulated like closing time or something like that, but it was regulated in that anyone could drink as much as they wanted.

Now that, I guess, for the company in which Ahasuerus found himself was not a particularly unpleasant law. And it's not surprising that at the end of, I'm surprised they lasted that long for seven days.

It's not surprising that on the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded his servants as eunuchs to bring in Queen Vasti before the king. And I guess that this was the final straw. He's looking for more and more ways in which to establish his own authority and his glory.

And now he's choosing his wife, Queen Vasti, and he's going to have her brought in in order for his mates, in order for his cohorts to gaze at her and to admire her beauty, but not in any kind of honourable sense. This was an act of lust and a degrading, degrading procedure, a performance in which his wife was being brought in to be sport and entertainment for the drunken nobles and government officials.

[23 : 48] And she said, no. And the police fell into panic.

You can feel the awkwardness, can't you? You're reading through the story and you think, this is not happening. After all that I have done and all the money that's been spent, Ahasuerus is saying, the millions and millions and millions of pounds or dollars that I have spent personally of my own royal treasury to throw this feast that has lasted six months in order to bolster my position as emperor, just when I'm just at that point, the last moment when it's all gone so well for me, the whole thing came crashing down.

And the man was left a laughing stop. Because the emperor, who spent six months trying to preach his own authority and his own kingship, his own rule of law, could not even control his own wife.

I reckon that his friends, so-called, would have been laughing up their sleeve at him. This was the worst possible insult or embarrassment to him.

Whatever you think of it, I'm not going into, we'll come into that in a few moments' time, but you can just see, I'm trying to set the scene, I'm just trying to get a picture of what's happening here.

[25 : 50] The sheer brass, the sheer embarrassment, the awkwardness of what is taking place here. And this man is left not knowing what to do.

And he starts fumbling around, seeking wisdom and advice from the only people he can turn to. What are they called? There's a whole list of very difficult names in verse 14.

Karshena, Shethar, and so on. And he's asking their advice. You see, he doesn't, even at the end of it, he doesn't have what it takes to make up his own mind or to make a decision by himself.

And all the way through the book, you're finding that this was his weakness. And he's asking their advice. And they're saying to him, well, the best thing, what's going to happen here is, it's not going to just reflect on you.

It's going to reflect on every male in the country. And because they're all going to take that example from Queen Vashti, if you don't do anything, then all the households in the whole empire will collapse. And we'll all be made a laughingstock.

[26 : 49] This has far-reaching implications. You've got to get rid of it. He couldn't put her to death because that would have been too public. So he had to act.

So he thought. In order to save his own face. And so he did. He chose to depose her. To send her out of the palace.

Never to return again. Never to see his face again. And to replace her with someone else. Chapter 2, of course, we'll see that next week.

God willing. Chapter 2. It tells us about how the story begins properly. And how Esther is chosen from amongst all the contestants.

So that's what they were. Contestants. In order to become the next queen.

[27 : 51] And so what began with great hope. Great optimism. Great royalty and pomp. Ended up with bitterness. And with tears. And I've tried to talk our way through the passage.

In the light of what we know to be the case in the gospel. But just in the last couple of minutes. I'd like us to look at it in another sense.

I'd like us to compare. What has happened in chapter 1. With life. As it should be. And life.

As it one day. Will be. If you compare. The whole dynamic. Between Ahasuerus. And his wife. Where he clearly looks upon her.

As an object. Of desire. There was no real love. In Ahasuerus. At all. All he wanted to do.

[28 : 55] Was to use his wife. As a political pawn. Another way of impressing. His real friends. That's not love. And so.

For when she turned around. And said no. It's not really surprising. Is it? Because.

If it had been love. He would never have asked. Or commanded. Her to be brought in. In the first place. And she wouldn't have to. Have refused his command. How different is that?

From. In the New Testament. The way that. The Lord commands. Husbands and wives. To interact. With each other. How different.

Is chapter 1. Of Esther. Where the king. Where the king. Looks on his wife. And treats her. As an object. To be used. With the way. In which husbands. In Ephesians chapter 5.

[29 : 52] Are commanded. To love their wives. As Christ. Loved the church. And then. As a result of that. With that same.

Reciprocal love. There is this. Amazing. Interaction. In which. The natural. Loving. Leadership. Of the husband.

Leads on. To a natural. Loving. Submission. And surrender. Of the wife. It's not that they don't talk to each other. It's not that he points the finger to her. And that he commands her to do this.

That and that. She's not a slave. She's not a servant. Apart from the fact that we're all servants of one another. That's what Christ said. We're all servants of one another. But what a difference.

To the picture that Paul presents in Ephesians chapter 5. When he is replicating. Jesus love for the church. And our obedience to him.

[30 : 51] And that replication takes place. In the home where there is a husband and a wife. If there is a husband and a wife. And if they are living as the Lord commands them to live.

And communicating as Christ does with his. Then it takes place without us even knowing. It takes place in a natural environment. Where there is no need for tears.

And no need for embarrassment or awkwardness. Because each one of them is treating the other with love and respect. And with honor. Just as Christ loved us.

So we are to love one another. And how different is this chapter. This feast. That's the best we can do. Isn't it?

It's about as long as is possible to organize a feast in this world. It's about as much as you can ever spend. It's about as lavish as can ever be taking place in this world.

[31 : 51] No expense was spared. And yet it ends. And because there is an end to everything. Isn't it? It's just like the wine at the wedding. That Jesus attended. It ran out. That's what happens in a broken and a sinful world.

The things that we enjoy in this world. They come to nothing. They come to an end. And if you're not living for God. If you're living for just things and pleasure and amusement.

And things that have no value whatsoever. Then you want more. You have to have more. It's like a drug. You can't be satisfied because you're not looking for satisfaction in the right thing.

But when you follow Jesus. Then you discover what he's done for you. Do you know what it tells us? He's done for us.

He's done. He's taken us. You know. It's again. It's tremendous. To contrast the way in which Ahasuerus.

[32 : 52] He wants to grab his wife and use her because she's. She's. Beautiful. To look at. But when you compare it with what Jesus has done.

Jesus has taken us who were unbeautiful. Who were unattractive. But he hasn't grabbed us. He hasn't laid hold upon us.

He has brought us. Lovingly. He has displayed his love for us. And made us. Into his people.

By. Opening our hearts and our lives and our eyes. To the love that he demonstrated to us on the cross. When he gave himself. That's the first element of love.

And that's why I know that Ahasuerus did not love his wife. There was no love in their relationship. It's a tragedy. But when I compare that with what Jesus has done for us.

[33 : 52] In dying on the cross. So that he could gently attract us. And bring us into his kingdom. And to make us his own. And when I compare that to what we will one day.

Will do. In Revelation chapter 19. Where he describes heaven. As the marriage supper of the lamb. Which will be a feast that will last. Forever. Where God will not take advantage of us.

Where we will forever see the face of our saviour. And be with him. And his name will be on our foreheads. And dying. And sighing. And tears. And heartbreak.

And bitterness. And disappointment. And dissatisfaction. Will be no more. And there will be an endless feast. For all eternity. In perfection. And in bliss. And in total happiness.

Where God's people. Will forever love to see his face. And will forever love to be in his presence. Where he will look upon them with true love.

[34 : 56] Undying love. The love that has taken us from where we were. In our filth and our sinfulness. And has paid the ultimate price for our sin. To bring us to himself.

And he has taken us out of the fearful pit. And from the mighty clay. He has set our feet upon a rock. And he has established our goings. And he has prepared us. For his kingdom.

He has worked in us. Lovingly. Steadily. Day by day. To prepare us for that kingdom. Which one day will be revealed. And will be ushered. Into the king in love.

And we will not refuse. We will run to him. Because. This is true love.

It's almost like God. Is. Putting this. Writing this chapter. For us. To show us.

[35 : 53] How it's not. And then he writes the new testament for us. To show us. How it is. Have you got that love?

Have you listened to him? Have you come? Have you trusted in him? Do you know. For yourself. That love. That will not let you go.

That love. That will stay with you. Through thick and thin. And that it will accept you. For what you are. Not what you look like.

What age you are. What you can do. What your abilities are. But will accept you. For what you are. Because nothing compares. With the love of God.

In Christ Jesus. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Our gracious and eternal God. We pray that you will open our eyes. To the tremendous love of God.

[36 : 56] In Jesus. We ask that. As we. Start out. In. Seeing God. Where you are not. Where you appear.

To be absent. There's a sense in which. We can see you all the clearer. We ask Lord. That you will bless your word. To us tonight. Bless it to our souls.

And to our hearts. Pray that it will affect us. Encourage us. Confirm to us. Our standing. In Jesus Christ. And that it will draw anyone.

Who hasn't yet come. To know you. In Jesus name. Amen. We'll sing in. Closing in. Psalm 66.

The traditional version of the psalm. It's on page 299. 9.