

# The Glory of Man

Esther 1

*Sermon preached by Rev. Joshua Flinn, 3 September 2023, AM Service.*

In 597 BC, Israel, because of their sin, was exiled to Babylon... under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar. Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was captured... his sons were executed in front of him... he was blinded... and taken to Babylon with many of the other Jews.

Solomon's temple was destroyed, and the walls of Jerusalem were in rubble.

This was understandably devastating for the Jews.

Under Solomon, the nation of Israel had become so influential, that dignitaries from other nations would come and visit... and they would be in awe of the culture and the architecture and the wealth.

And yet Babylon eclipsed them all.

In the dog eat dog world, they had been the one eaten. And yet, in the span of time, it became apparent that even Babylon was not the biggest dog on the block. Because they, in turn, were defeated by Persia.

There is always someone bigger.

And I say that intentionally... keep that in mind.

So now Israel is in exile in the Persian empire. And the Holy Spirit gives us two, largely parallel accounts regarding Israel.

On the one hand, we have Ezra and Nehemiah, who record the return of the Jews from exile to the promised land. God restores them.

On the other hand, we have the book of Esther. The events begin soon after Ezra begins to re-build the temple. And they trace explicitly, those among the Israelites, who decided, *not to return to the promised land*, but rather to stay in Babylon.

So Ezra and Nehemiah... focusing on the Jews who returned from exile.

And Esther... the Jews who stayed away.

Now we're going to pick up on that as we go through this book... and it's a very important point. Because if you miss that, you'll be prone to misunderstand the entire purpose of this book.

So what is life like in exile for the Jews? The picture presented to us is striking.

This king who ruled over the exiles is not just any old king, he's the king of the known world...

The opening verses give a testimony of this. He reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces, from India to Ethiopia...

And in verse 4, his kingdom is described as glorious and his majesty excellent and splendid. And even his wife was beautiful to behold (vs 11).

This man ruled.

And that's where things get interesting.

Ahasuerus desired to have his power and glory recognized by his kingdom... and to do that, he paraded his power for 180 days.

Verse 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 capital..."

And despite the fact that women were not to party with the men in cultures such as this, his palace was big enough that Queen Vashti could have a separate feast for the women. In the same palace!

And boy it was a party... beautiful curtains, and magnificent pavement. Drinks in golden vessels... royal wine in abundance... according to what? The generosity of the king. And he was capable of much generosity.

So far so good.

But then the cracks begin to show. The king has been displaying his power for 180 days. And now 7 more.

And when his heart was merry with wine, vs 10, he sent a command by his eunuchs to bring his Queen... why? That he might parade her also in front of these men.

We aren't told what for... plenty of commentators want to speculate that it's sexual... but we aren't told. There is a Jewish tradition that said that she was commanded to appear with nothing on but her crown... but that's not in the text. And it's likely made up.

And in fact, the very presence of seven eunuchs indicates that the king desired the sexual purity of his wife to remain without question.

But the Holy Spirit doesn't actually tell us. What he does highlight, though, is that she was the king's final statement of power on display... his crowning achievement, so to speak...

And yet... she said no.

She refused to go.

This great king, with the world at his feet, can't control his own wife.

And how quickly the merriness caused by the wine in verse 10, now turns to rage...

This great king, unable to control his temper.

So the seven eunuchs give way to seven advisors... the highest in the kingdom, verse 14... and the conversation is striking.

Why? Because their reaction shows just how fragile this entire power structure actually is.

All it takes to risk the collapse of it all, is Queen Vashti refusing to go to her husband when he asks her to... and the shockwaves are felt in every household in every part of the land.

The queen's behaviour will become known to all women, so that they will despise their husbands in their eyes (vs 17)... there will be excessive contempt and wrath (vs 18)...

Her crime is not only against the king, then, but against all the princes and all the people who are in all the provinces of the king.

And so they suggest to get rid of her. Again, many think she was beheaded... but that's just a Jewish rabbi making things up... it isn't in the text and we aren't given any information about it. The language is more likely to be that they removed her title and exiled her.

And then to make sure they were still in a position of power, they sent letters to every household that "each man should be master in his own house."

Now as we reflect on these events, we need to consider two major implications.

### **1. First, the nature of earthly power.**

Influential... militarily supreme... bounteous riches... palatial palaces... The kingdom of Persia spread even beyond that of Solomon.

And yet, how fragile it was.

One person saying no risked utter collapse.

Now you may well wonder, why that's even significant. Who really cares if Persia collapses just like Assyria did. Why is that in the Bible?

The pain of this situation, though, congregation, is this: Ahasuerus is a king after Israel's own heart. He's the kind of king they wanted... a king like the other nations.

He had all that they desired.

And yet how skin deep it was.

The book of Esther teaches us about the nature of earthly power structures. And it's a lesson we need to learn even today.

In God's providence, we're approaching yet another election. But we need to take a good long look at the kind of leaders we want... and the kind of leaders we need.

And I suggest to you that those are two different kinds of leaders.

The leaders we want are the same kind of leaders that Israel wanted and the same kind of leader that Persia currently had. The kind of leader that would bring them into prosperity... make their lives easier by putting money in their pockets and food and alcohol in their mouths... any leader like that deserves our support, surely...

And yet, how powerful does money and military might make a nation?

Ahasuerus had everything... and yet with all the power he had, he ultimately proved to be impotent.

Making laws about this, making laws about that... it has the appearance of authority, but it's only a veneer, isn't it?

Brothers and sisters, when you look for leaders like this for your peace and happiness, you are looking in all the wrong places.

And the painful irony of this passage is that the leadership of the king here is reflected in every single household. And that's a truism also. How many women desire, even now in the age of feminism, for their husband to give them a certain lifestyle... to provide a certain level of prosperity... to ensure that there is no suffering because they have the power to avoid the pain.

And then they get it... and they find themselves desperately unhappy.

And men aspire to use their headship to pursue the same end, and yet no matter how hard they pursue it, they are desperately unhappy.

Families, working themselves to the bone to keep up with the Joneses... to get ahead of the curve... and for what?

Even Hollywood, with all its riches and fame, lives on anti-depressants.

Congregation, the problem here is the same problem Israel faced: such power cannot bring true peace. It cannot bring true stability. There's always something bigger or someone more powerful... and there are always little things outside your control.

Do not look to earthly power for your peace and joy. It will not satisfy you. On the contrary... it will break you. Why? Because ultimately it's an idol... it is a denial of God, and a desire to no longer need him.

Which is why Christians can be content with very little... and it's why Christians, like Christ, can be joyful about having the lowest place... and they can be a servant and be at peace. Interesting isn't it.

## 2. Second, we see in Esther chapter 1, the hidden power of God.

Despite the awesome might of Ahasuerus... it was but a candle to the inferno that was Almighty God.

He owns the cattle on a thousand hills... he rules over all he has made... he even knows all the stars *by name*. Persia, as great as it may be, is a miniscule dot in the great expanse that God lays claim to.

He owns all things, he knows all things, he is all powerful.

And it's this Almighty God that Israel despised... and they broke covenant with... which is why they're in exile in the first place.

One of the striking things about the book of Esther is that God is never mentioned explicitly in the text.

And yet, for any Israelite who had their head screwed on, they would recognize this striking reality... that though God is not known in Persia, that makes not one whit of difference to the supremacy of his might.

And the question posed to Israel in this book is ultimately this: Are you finally ready follow the true king of creation? Or will you bind yourself once more to the world, and face their same end?

Because how easily can God, even from behind the scenes, pluck one string, and the greatest civilisation on earth crumbles.

Where will you go for help? What do you look to for strength?

Because brothers and sisters, many of us continue to struggle with this same conundrum. God seems absent... he's a spirit... we can't even see him! And we know he pulls the strings behind the scenes, but his ability to bring joy seems measly when compared to money, and alcohol, and sex, and physical strength, and reputation.

And yet, in reality, it is only God that provides those things in the first place. And he can just as easily take away what he gives. As he did to Israel when they began to worship the created things and denied the creator.

God is not absent. And he is still in control.

And he is in control over your life also. So think the reigns are better off in your hands? Are you more powerful and more wise and more loving and kind than your God?

Of course you aren't. Submit to him... learn of him... worship him. Obey him... he is a much better king than any fallen man.

Conclusion:

As we read through Esther, we are prone to characterize Persia as deserving of God's judgement because of their sin... and we're prone to think of Israel as the enslaved and abused victim. But we need to remember Israel was in exile *explicitly* because of their sin.

And so the reality is that **all** the parties presented here in the book of Esther deserved God's wrath...

And yet God would save his people; not because they were any better than the pagan ruler, not because their women were submissive... and their men led the families appropriately... not because they refrained from drinking and lust and kept a reign on their anger... because they didn't do those things!

But God would save his people simply to put on display his grace and his kindness to them in Christ Jesus. And in that grace, he would bring them from death to life... from shame to glory... from the kingdom of the Devil, into the kingdom of his beloved Son.

That's grace, congregation... and its grace that thousands of years later, that same God of Israel might be your God... and my God.

That he would not hold our sins against us, but that the king over all creation would face justice on behalf of his citizens. And by his blood we would go free.

Solomon's kingdom could not hold a candle to the kingdom of Assyria or Persia... but no kingdom of earth can hold a candle to the kingdom of Christ... he is the king of kings and lord of lords...

And although in this life we may end up with nothing, this life will give way to a weight of glory beyond all comparison. An eternal kingdom, ruled in justice and righteousness. A kingdom that, by his grace, we will inherit.

May we keep our eyes fixed on Christ, the true king of all Creation... may we served him well... and worship him faithfully.

Amen.