

Sunday, November 13, 2022

The Silent Sovereignty of God

Intro

- Announcements
 - Young adults Tuesday night
 - Youth group Friendsgiving, need people to bring food
- Beginning a new series this morning called the gospel according to Esther
 - Explain
 - Esther is a very unique book in the cannon
- Background info in the plan of redemption
 - Garden
 - Fall
 - Noah
 - Abraham
 - Egypt and Exodus
 - Wandering and Conquering
 - Reigning and Refusing
 - Exile in Babylon
 - Darius from Daniel
 - Cyrus then lets the Jews go home
 - Exile is over
 - But the temple and Jerusalem is not being rebuilt
 - Enter Esther
- This morning I want us to look at the silent sovereignty of God

- there are many times we may be tempted to feel that God has gone dark and he is silent but Esther is a book that will assure us that he is constantly working all things together for our good
 - Esther can be read as commentary to Romans 8:28
 - How do we now for sure that he is working all things together for our good? especially in times where we can't see his hand working.
- This morning as we dive into chapter 1 I want us to compare and contrast kings. The first chapter of Esther is laid out in such a way so as to make us recognize and stand in awe of the king but the script gets flipped on him at the very end which leads us to transpose from considering him to considering the true King of all the earth. Let's pray

- What we face

- *1Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, 2in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, 3in 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, 4while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days*
- I found that when I was trying to find Esther I had to keep doing the Bible song in order to get to it. It is sandwiched in between Ezra and Nehemiah and that is significant. Why?
 - The Israelites were sent into captivity in Babylon for their disobedience and unfaithfulness to the covenant. They were supposed to live and operate as a nation of priests and a light in the darkness but instead the darkness consumed them and they began to look exactly like their neighbors. Idolatry. Civil war. Chaos. Northern Israel had zero righteous kings and southern Judah only had few. Both were then conquered by Assyria, which then becomes the Medco-Persian empire.
 - God said this would happen but no one listened. We read in Jeremiah 29 that the exile was both punishment and discipline. They were to live in the city of Babylon but not be OF the city of Babylon. They were to maintain their unique identity but were not to despise the city for in it's good they would find their good.

- Years later, the exile is over. They are allowed to return home. One would expect that after reading Ezra we would get another story of the return of the exile. But we don't. We get Esther instead. What is going on?
- In my study of this book, I realized that much of my knowledge of it was primarily informed by VeggieTales. I've obviously read this book many times and know the overall story but the details caught me off guard, and I think this will happen to you as well. Esther is about God's providence and sovereignty towards a people who have forgotten him.
 - Babylon's plan all along was to get the Jewish elites to assimilate into their culture. After a few generations they would no longer be uniquely Jewish but would have adopted the cultural norms of Babylon.
 - The false prophets Hananiah and others said to hate Babylon and live separate from the city. Jeremiah tells us that true exiles are to seek the good of the city but not be OF the city.
 - Esther then is about Jews who have remained in voluntary exile. They can leave if they want to. But they don't. They stay and assimilate into the culture. Yet still God cares for them, and this is what we will see laid out in the book.
 - So why Xerxes?
- Right out the gate of this passage we get some clues as to who's one of the main characters. King Ahasuerus. That's a mouthful. Ahasuerus. Ever heard of this guy? Have you seen 300? Remember the half naked Persian king with all the crazy piercings? That's this dude. Ahasuerus is the Hebrew equivalent to his name in Greek which is more commonly known. King Xerxes.
 - This was the main dude of the times. The most powerful guy in the most powerful kingdom in the known world, with the the most wealth and the most awesome nose piercings. Well just from 300. The text sets the stage with one of the greatest kings of the time.
 - He is giving a 6 month long feast for his nobles and military commanders and this is pretty common in Persian culture, but the reason for the feast is given in verse 4. He is doing it in order to show off his power, his wealth, and his glory. The irony here, which plays a huge role in the book, is that he is not the one with the power regardless of the fact he can have a 6th month party, he may have massive wealth but God is the one who provides for his people, and even by the end of the

chapter we see that even his household didn't give him the glory he thought he deserved.

- *5And 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. 6There 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. 7Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. 8And 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. 9Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.*
 - This is what you do after a 6th month rager right? Throw a second party! But this time for only 7 days. Instead of bringing just the nobility and military leaders, this time its for everyone living in Susa. This was the winter capital of the Persian empire.
 - Great detail is given about the background. Cups the poofs, the mosaics. Tons of opulent wealth and therefore ridiculous power right? I mean look, the bro even micromanages how the people were supposed to celebrate.
 - Persian custom was when the king drank you drank. Persian leaders would often make important decisions while drunk because they believed the spirits brought them closer to the spiritual plane. They would evaluate the decisions while sober but it was a common practice. But the king is saying, everyone is free to drink as much or as little as he pleases. He is flexing his power towards even food and drink.
 - Along comes Vashti, which means beautiful or beloved so it is probably a title, and she too is having her own party in a different palace owned by the king.
- Can you picture the scene? Ridiculous wealth and power. A Jew reading this would not have been surprised by the details because they had been living in the empire as a people for 70 years.
 - Put yourself in their position. They have been exiled out of their promised land, a land that was to be their inheritance as the people of God and this was due to their disobedience. The exile was their fault and they must have felt that God had abandoned them. I mean look around them! This is the most powerful nation in up

to this to point in history! How could things be looking up? So maybe they stayed and gave in to the cultural assimilation. Or maybe they went back to Jerusalem, but either way after 70 years in exile it must have been easy to assume God has forgotten about them.

- Make it personal

- What we must do

- Let's keep reading

- *10On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, 11to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, b in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. 12But 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.*

- The king is pretty drunk by this point and we all know that the best decisions are made after you've been raging for a week. The phrase, his heart was merry with wine is a Hebrew idiom for drunkenness.

- Explain the role of the eunuchs
 - Care of the harem (over 300 concubines)
 - All about progeny rather than sexual fulfillment
- Explain Persian modesty

- So he was making a very poor decision. But the point is clear, power and authority had gone to his head. He was the big man on campus. He was in charge of the greatest empire the world had seen to that point. He was probably throwing this feast for the nobility and military leaders because they were going to head into Greece and seek to conquer more of their territory, from this military journey we get 300, the battle of Thermopylae and the battle of Marathon. Famous failures from military history.

- Xerxes was full of himself and wanted everyone to see his power, his wealth, his glory and so he brings out his greatest possession, his beauty, his beloved, Queen Vashti as the sum of it all. And she refuses.

- Can you imagine? All his power, all his splendor, and his main squeeze dishonors him in front of the entire capital. The authors point is pretty clear.
 - For all his wealth and power, Xerxes is not in control.
 - we see this throughout scripture. God is the one instituting the rise and fall of kingdoms. God is sovereign, totally powerful, and the nations are but the drop in a bucket for him. The king may plan his ways, but the lord directs his steps. That was true of Israel and its true of Xerxes for all his power and wealth. He was not in control.
- So you can see the tension the author is trying to make us feel. We have to trust in the silent sovereignty of God. When it looks like all is lost, when we cannot see his hand moving in action, when things seem grim, we are called, just like the Jews, to trust that God has not abandoned us and will not forsake us but is working all things together for our good and his glory. We have to trust the silent sovereignty of God. He is a better king than Xerxes, with more power and glory. Let's trust him.
- Our problem is that we don't. In fact, on our own we can't.

- Why we can't

- We are tempted to trust in exclusively what we can see. Though God is working things together for good, our circumstances and the in your face aspects of life seem to tell us otherwise. Consider Joseph for a while
 - Story of Joseph from Genesis
 - Yet one of the last lines in the story is Joseph's declaration that even though his brothers meant evil on him, God meant it all for good. This is the type of situation we see in the story of Esther and what is all the more surprising is that it is to Jews who have nearly fully assimilated into the conquering culture.
 - Think WW2. It's like Anne Frank giving up and taking the second place job under Hitler.
 - yet God is not done. And he is not done with us
- But there is something in us that prevents us from trusting him at all times. This is called idolatry. Let's look at the rest of the passage and see a few forms of this in how this part of the story ends

- *3Then 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 judgment, 14the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): 15"According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?" 16Then 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 peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. 17For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, c since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' 18This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. 19If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and 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. 20So 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." 21This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. 22He 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.*
- Vashti dissed Xerxes, so he brings his yes men together and they form what is probably the stupidest plan ever. Let's make an example of her and then our wives will listen too!
 - They demote Vashti to the bottom of the harem. She no longer has access to Xerxes and therefore no longer has power. She no longer will be the one to bear him a son and in an honor shame culture this was essential. She cannot be executed because it would ruin his political alliances, which is probably why he married her in the first place, but since she brought shame on him he will do the same.
 - Leads us to the heart issue of idolatry here
 - What is an idol? Explain
 - Xerxes: power

- His inner circle: approval
- Vashti: family
- Later on we will see Hamans: power and approval
- Mordecias: national pride
- Common Jewish one: religious morality
- How idolatry prevents us from trusting God's silent sovereignty
 - If I get this, then I will be ok. If I have that, then I will know that I have worth
 - Turing a good thing into an ultimate thing, the only thing
 - Money for example
 - Power and security is the deep idol
 - Comfort and approval is the deep idol
 - Two very different deep idols, two different uses for the surface idol of money
 - Sex
 - Power
 - Comfort
- The concept of idolatry is insanely complex in the scriptures, not simply the bowing down to a statute but the entire basis of what we are building our lives upon.
- Traditional Idols
 - Family
 - Honor
 - Respect
- Western Idols
 - Freedom
 - Comfort
 - Power

- So we are called to trust God in his silent sovereignty over our lives, and we may even declare this with our mouth, but functionally we serve a different master.
- This is why we need Jesus

- How Jesus did it

- The issue of idolatry pervades the human heart, John Calvin is famous for saying that the heart is an idol factory.
 - Not in the sense of wood and stone but in seeking our worth, our value from something that is not God
 - Even the religious people use God to get what we really want
 - You can see this in your prayers
 - How much time is spent in honoring, in delighting in, in adoring, in confession, and how much is spent in petition?
 - You can REALLY see it in your unanswered prayers
 - Do you expect life to go a certain way and when it doesn't, what happens?
 - You know an idol is an idol because you have to have it and the thought of losing it isn't just hard or upsetting, it is life ending and devastating.
- The issue of idolatry goes all the way back to the garden
 - Adam and Eve wanted autonomy. We do not want you, we want your stuff
 - Romans 1 talks about this and declares that the worse thing that God can do to us is give us over to our idols because they will betray us.
- The issue of idolatry is at the center of our human condition. Even in our religiosity we are looking to other things to functionally save us, give us worth or value, rather than the one who really can.
- This is why we need Jesus. We need the better Adam who passed the test in the garden. He did not want to go to the cross for it would not be a pleasant experience for him, losing the joy and union with the father that he had known from all eternity? If there is any other way let it be. But he said what we are to say in times of uncertainty and hardship, not my will but your will be done.

- We need a king better than Xerxes who doesn't use his power and wealth to shore up his value and worth but who willingly emptied himself of all power and glory and wealth and dignity, become low like us, and submitted himself to death even death on a cross to bring us home.
- We need a better Vashti who did not refuse the call from the king when he said, there is but one way to save my people, you must drink the cup of my wrath against their sin. You must die for them to live, there is no other way for my justice to be satisfied. Our true Vashti obeyed the will of the King, even to the point of death on a cross.
- Everyone of us has a functional savior. I am increasingly realizing that mine are approval and comfort. With my lips I say Jesus is lord but when push comes to shove, too often its comfort or too often its approval. Each one of you has this as well. What is the thing you are functionally looking towards to give you value and worth? What lets you know that you matter?
 - Is it approval like the yes men of Xerxes? Is it family? Is it security? Is it power and prestige like Xerxes? Each one of us is looking deep down to something besides Jesus to rescue us, to save us, to tell us that we matter and until we repent of these deep idols and turn to him for what we are asking the idol to give us, we will never have confidence in the silent sovereignty of god because our idols scream much louder.

- How through faith we live now

- Jesus lived fully faithful to God's plan of redemption, even to the point of death on the cross. Though he deserved to be rescued, he was abandoned that we might be rescued. Though he deserved God's care he was given up to humiliation. Though he trusted perfectly, he was cursed rather than blessed
- When we see Jesus pursuing us through the crushing abandonment of the Father, when we see his trust in the fathers plan for us even though it meant his death, when we see Jesus "forgotten" at the cross so that we might be "forever remembered" before the Father's face we have the resources that we need to deal with the here and now of God's Silent Sovereignty.
- You will never defeat your idols by smashing them with pithy try harder or do better. The cycle will continue until you uproot them with what Thomas Chalmers called the Expulsive Power of a New Affection.

- When Jesus is increasingly becoming your all in all, your idols become less and less.
- Paul prays to the Ephesians Christian's that the eyes of their heart might be enlighten that they may know the depth and length and height and width of the love of Christ
 - You might know, but do you KNOW, KNOW with your deepest affections
 - When we see what it cost Jesus to save us, and we truly see it with our deepest affections, lesser things stop having as much value
 - when we see the forgiveness that was given to us and this burns and enflames our heart, forgiveness will flow more quickly
 - When we see Jesus willingly laying aside his power and humbling himself for us and this becomes the burning center of our life, the desire for power loses its power
 - When we see Jesus lose the approval of the father as the father's face is turned away and we see that he did that for us, his approval of us becomes the only approval that really matters
 - When we see Jesus abandoned in his worst moments by his family, by his friends, by his father, by us, and this enflames the affections of our hearts, hearing him say well done my child is greater than the approval we so desperately long to hear from our parents.
 - When we see Jesus facing temptation with drops of blood in the garden for us, fighting with every breath in him for the purity of his sacrifice, our little temptations lose their power and we can fight with what we have for him.
- This is the gospel according to Esther, its the gospel according to the Bible, and it's what you need more desperately than anything else if you want to trust God's silent sovereignty. Are you hurting and struggling in this? You are not alone. Let's go to the table and taste and see that he is good, that we might trust and believe that he is working all things together for our good. Let's pray