

So we'll be looking at Esther chapter one, beginning at verse one. Again, that's Esther chapter one, beginning at verse one. The unintended irony is not lost on me. I just came back from a trip to Israel. And so I got to see all these different sites. I even got to go to Egypt and see some stuff there. And here we are starting a series through a book of the Old Testament, one of the few books where none of the events take place in any of those places. But I'm still really excited.

I mean, I'm sure most of you are familiar with the story of the Book of Esther. The Book of Esther has become somewhat of a favorite among modern Christians today. There's a lot of commentaries written about it, a lot of studies on the Book of Esther. But you know, that wasn't always the case. The Book of Esther actually was rather unpopular in the church for most of the church's history. And one of the major reasons for that was because the Book of Esther never says the name of God specifically. Unlike other books of the Old Testament, you never see any of the characters mention God, and you never see the narrator say, and so the Lord did this. At first glance, it seems like a very secular book. But on closer examination, you'll find that even though God's name is not mentioned, he is all over this book. And that's actually a stylistic choice by the author. The author himself, he is intentionally not saying the name of God because he wants the reader to look into this story and see that God is at work even when there isn't a prophet telling the people of Israel, hey, God is at work.

God is always at work in his hidden works of providence for the good of his people. That is the common theme we're gonna run into again and again throughout the book of Esther. And in that way, the book of Esther is really helpful. In fact, it's really helpful for me anyway. Because I don't know about you, maybe you all have different experience, but I don't walk around with a narrator above my head saying, and so the Lord ordained this for Hunter. That's not the way we live our lives. The way we live our lives is we just kind of live our lives. And we have to trust that God is at work. The book of Esther tells us that even our very ordinary lives, in our very ordinary day-to-day sort of lives, God is at work and he is sovereignly working out his purposes for his people.

So that brings us to the chapter we're looking at today. What we're going to look at in the first chapter here is a bit of a royal drama. a royal drama. How many of y'all have ever either seen part of the show or at least seen the trailers for shows like The Crown or The Great, those kind of royal dramas? Some of you are smirking. Some of you have seen those trailers. Yep. Now, these sorts of royal dramas, they're really popular right now, and I think they're popular for a couple of reasons. First, they're popular because they have what every glorified soap opera has. Lots of drama, lots of relationships, lots of twists and turns, and you know, we like that. But on top of that, these relationships, the stakes aren't just, oh, will the girl fall in love with the guy? These relationships infect an entire kingdom. They have broad implications. And that's really the kind of story we have right here. We have here a story of how a marital spat echoes out into an empire-wide decree.

So let's look at this text together. Before we do, let's ask God's help in prayer. Father in heaven, as we open up your word, we ask that what we know not, you would teach us. What we have not, give us. And what we are not, make us. For the sake of your son, Jesus Christ, amen.

Reading from Esther chapter one, beginning at verse one. Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, THE Ahasuerus, who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces. In those days, as King Ahasuerus sat in his royal throne, which is in Susa, the capital, in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his princes in attendance. the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces being in his

presence. And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, a hundred and eighty days.

And when these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Susa the capital, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were hangings of white and violet linen, held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty. and the drinking was done according to the law. There was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person.

Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace, which belonged to King Azeris. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was married with wine, he commanded Mehumen, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagatha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry, and his wrath burned within him.

Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times, for it was the custom of the king, so to speak, before all who knew law and justice and were close to him, Karshena, Shethar, Admetha, Tarshish, Merez, Marcena, and Memuken, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who had access to the king's presence, and sat in the first place in his kingdom. According to the law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti because she did not come at the command of King Azeris delivered by the eunuchs?

And in the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king, but also all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought into his presence, but she did not come. And this day, the ladies of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen's conduct, will speak in the same way to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger.

If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him, and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti should come no more into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another, who is more worthy than she. And when the king's edict, which he shall make, is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all the women will give honor to their husbands, great and small.

And this word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memuchin proposed. So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script, and to every people according to their language, that every man should be master in his own household, and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

This is the word of the Lord. May he add his blessing to it.

Now if y'all notice, I've titled this message, Who's in Charge Here? And I've done that for a couple of reasons. First, that seems to be the question that the author wants the reader to ask. The point of this first chapter is to sort of introduce one of our main characters. One of the things we have to remember about the Book of Esther, the Book of Esther is a historical account. It is also scripture, so it teaches theology. but it is also a work of literature. Thus, the book of Esther has a plot, it has a setting, and it has characterization. And what we have in this first chapter is characterization for King Ahasuerus. The book wants us to ask the question, who is this guy, King Ahasuerus? What kind of kingdom does he run? What kind of court does he run? That's gonna feature into the narrative as we go.

I've also titled this message, Who's in Charge Here? Because it's the question I asked as I read this story. Who's in charge here? I mean, at first it seems like the king is in charge, I mean, he's got this big empire, but then his wife doesn't listen to him, and then he seems to be sort of guided by his advisors, Memuchin seems more in charge than King Ahasuerus is. Who's really in charge here? And then from a theological perspective, I might ask the question more broadly, who's in charge here? Why is this in the scripture? What's the point of this chapter? It just seems like another story of a foolish, selfish king doing what foolish, selfish kings do.

You know, we could ask that question more broadly about our world today. We don't have to look very far in the news cycle to see plenty of examples of people in high position, whether it be in the government or whether it be the latest tech mogul, who are making foolish, selfish decisions for their own ends. And we ask the question as we look around the world, who's in charge here? How can God truly be sovereign? How can God be in control? How can God be working out his good plan for his people? in a world run by selfish tyrants working to please themselves.

What this passage teaches us is that in this passage we see how God is sovereignly working out his good purposes through even a sinful, corrupt tyrant working to please himself. I'll say that again, in this passage we see that God is sovereignly working out his good purposes even through a sinful corrupt tyrant working to please himself.

Now as we look at this passage, we're gonna be looking under three major headings. Actually, yeah, four major headings. I'm sorry, I'm so used to three. Four major headings to sort of help guide my thoughts as we go along. It's more for my help than for yours, but hope it helps you too. First, we're gonna be looking at the setting of the story, a lavish party. Then we're gonna look at the first action of the story, a drunken command. Then the result of that, sort of the resolution, a foolish decree, and finally we'll draw some points of application with a sovereign God.

So first, a lavish party. Look with me at verse one. Now it took place in the days of King Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus, who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces. The first thing the author does is he establishes the host of this party. King Ahasuerus. This was one of the great kings of Media Persia. He's very famous in history, more famously known under the name Xerxes, his Greek name. That yes, that Xerxes, who led the Persians against the Greeks in the famous Battle of the Spartan 300. This is that Xerxes. This Xerxes, as you can see, reigned over 127 provinces. His grandfather was King Cyrus. Many of us have heard of King Cyrus. Famously in scripture, he is the one who in 538 put out the decree allowing all the different peoples, including the Jews, to return from their captivity to the land of Israel and rebuild the temple. King Ahasuerus was not known to be so benevolent. King Ahasuerus was known as temperamental and cruel. At this point in his reign, the third year, he had just quelled several revolts, one in Egypt and one in Babylon. Now he's garnering support as he's about to march into Greece to

finish what his father started there. That's kind of the setting for what he's about to do. So that's the host of our party.

Now we can see the splendor of the party. Look with me at verse three. In the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles of the princes of the provinces being in his presence. And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.

Now, we shouldn't get the picture in our head that King Ahasuerus hosted a banquet for his nobles, and the banquet lasted 180 days. That'd be really long for a banquet, even for the Persians. What most likely happened is the Persians have a banquet, the king sets up a banquet for his nobles, maybe it lasts a couple weeks, and then he takes them on a 180-day tour of his empire, showing them all of his armies, all of his food reserves, just trying to establish for them, hey, I'm the top dog, I have this whole kingdom settled, we're ready to go take on Greece.

And so they get back to Susa, and here's what the king does after that in verse 5. And when these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Susa the capital, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. So if the officials are not convinced by the whole tour, the king says, hey, I'm going to host a party. And I'm not just going to invite the nobles. I'm not even just going to invite the upperclassmen. I'm inviting everyone. Anyone who lives in Susa, you are welcome to my palace, and we're going to party.

And so the king hosts this great banquet to show off his wealth. And I'm not gonna go through verse six again, but his wealth was incredible. The area that he's doing it in, the garden of the king's palace, it was the famous Persian gardens. In fact, our English word paradise actually comes from Herodotus' description of one of these parties. If you look at verse six again, you can see how he piles, the author piles luxury upon luxury upon luxury, and if it seems overwhelming, that's because it is.

This party represents the height of human extravagance and wealth. And King Ahasuerus represents the height of human power and authority. But, as we'll see with the two notes the author gives us that follows, power does not make prudent, nor does wealth make wise.

Look at the two little notes. that the author adds about this party. The first note comes in verses seven and eight. Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's bounty. And the drinking was done according to the law. There was no compulsion. So the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person.

Now, if you're wondering what in the world verse eight means, it's a little bit difficult to translate, but what essentially the author is saying is, the king set up a rule for the drinking, and the rule was, there are no rules. You can drink as much as you want. In fact, it is illegal for a servant to decline to serve you more wine. This is rather in character for the Persians. Herodotus, again, probably slanders the Persians a little bit here, but you get the idea that the Persians never made any important political decisions until they were drunk. Now, I don't think that that's

probably accurate, but you get the idea. The Persians were known for their overindulgence in alcohol. So what we have here is a big party where probably everyone is drunk.

Now, look at verse nine, second note we have. Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace, which belonged to King Azaris. Now, at first I read that verse and I think, aw, that's nice of King Azaris. He gives the queen her own little party. What a guy. Then you ask the question, wait, why isn't she at the king's party? Why does she have to have her own party? And why are all the noble's wives at that party? Well, it probably has something to do with the kind of entertainment provided at King Hazarus's party. According to the sources, at parties like these, the king's concubines provided the majority of the entertainment. What you have here is a party that not only represents the height of human wealth and extravagance and the height of human power, but also the height of human corruption.

This leads us to a little bit of a note about wealth. Now, wealth and power in themselves are not bad. They're good gifts from God, and God gives them to whom he pleases. But they are also opportunities for sin. What do I mean by that? Well, first, I don't want you to think about the person next to you. Think, oh, that wealthy person over there, this is for him. Friends, we live in America. We live in the United States of America. And by the world standards, all of us are in the top 1%. Moreover, because we live in the modern world, we live with luxuries King Ahasuerus would have died for. All of us, by any metric, are incredibly wealthy. And with wealth comes certain advantages, but also certain temptations.

Because God normally restrains the wickedness of man through want of time and want of resources. And when we are given lots of free time and lots of resources, that can actually awaken sinful desires that would normally have remained dormant. So we as just Americans living in the modern West, we have to be vigilant as Christians. Because wealth does not make wise and power does not make prudent. God does that. The Holy Spirit does that. He sanctifies us. And we need to pray for that sanctification. We need to keep watch over our lives because we have more opportunities to sin than most people throughout history have had, or most people throughout the world.

So here we see this lavish party, the King Ahasuerus says, and I don't know, I identify with it a little bit. So that's the setting for our story, this lavish party. Now we get to the first main action of the story, this drunken command. Look with me at verse 10. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehumen, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagatha, Zethar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Azeris, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful.

Now, there's a couple of things I want you to notice about this command. The first thing I want you to notice is that this command was ill-motivated. If you want to know what verse 10 means, when the heart of the king was married with wine, it's a euphemism, the king was drunk as a skunk. So he's married with wine, and obviously the command is to show off her beauty. It's selfish as well. This command is ill-motivated. The second thing we should notice about this command is that it is debasing. Who is functioning as the entertainment in this party right now? The king's concubines, his slave wives. And so, what is he saying when he's saying, hey, Queen Vashti, I want you to come and I want to show you off before all the people. He's treating his wife, his queen, as if she were a slave. Asking her to come bearing the royal crown actually adds insult to injury. Because the crown represents her status,

it represents her position as the queen of Persia. And she has to wear it as she's brought in, essentially, and objectified like a slave.

So the command is unmotivated, it is debasing, and third, it is imprudent. I don't think I have to explain why bringing a beautiful woman into the presence of a bunch of drunken men so they can oogle her is not probably a very prudent idea. But nevertheless, the king makes this command, and look how Vashti responds in verse 12. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command, delivered by the eunuchs. Now, the passage itself does not make a moral judgment on whether or not Queen Vashti should have come. Remember, this chapter is not so much about characterizing Queen Vashti as it is about characterizing King Ahasuerus. The point of the passage is that we understand what kind of king Ahasuerus is. So our question shouldn't be so much, well, should she have gone? Should she have not? Our question should be, well, how is King Ahasuerus going to respond when the queen resists his will?

Well, look again at verse 12. Then the king became very angry. and his wrath burned within him. The king blew his top. Why? Well, a couple of reasons. First, it hurt his pride. This is the king who rules over basically the entire known world. He's used to getting his way. Everyone bows to his every whim. You'll notice whenever the king is addressed, and whenever a suggestion is given to him, it's always prefaced by, if it pleases the king. And now Vashti has said, I'm not going to please the king. The second reason was because, well, it questioned his authority. Remember, why is he having this big banquet before all his nobles? Well, to show off that he's the top dog, to show off that his kingdom is stable, that he is in charge. And so it's a bad look, from his perspective, for the nobles to see that his wife won't listen to him. Because if his wife won't listen to them, why should they? So the king becomes very angry. And so, he does what any reasonable person would do and takes a personal marital squabble and turns it into a national affair. An affair of state.

Look with me at verse 15. He's talking to his nobles. According to the law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti because she did not obey the command of King Azeris delivered by the eunuchs? Notice here something, when we're characterizing King Ahasuerus, what kind of leader is King Ahasuerus? A pretty weak one. First he's threatened when his wife doesn't do what he says, and then instead of making a decision himself, he gathers his nobles and asks them what to do. This is a pattern we're gonna see throughout the book of Esther. King Ahasuerus seems completely incapable of making any decisions by himself. He always needs an advisor to tell him what to do.

But not only is King Ahasuerus weak, well, his advisors aren't much better. Look what Memucan suggests in verse 16. And in the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, Queen Vashti is wrong not only the king but also all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. So King Ahasuerus takes a personal issue between him and his wife and turns it into a matter of state. Memuchin takes this matter of state and turns it into a matter of empire-wide security and stability.

Now, if you're not laughing a little bit inside at this point, you probably should be. See, this is funny, and it's actually meant to be funny. The Book of Esther has many moments that are meant to be kind of funny. And that's perfectly in keeping with the character of God. Yes, this is God's word. Yes, it is profitable for teaching reproof correction. Yes, we need to take it seriously as we apply it to our lives and as we read it. But at the same time, when God tells a joke, it's polite to laugh. In fact, it's respectful to laugh because that's the response God wants from us. We're supposed to laugh at these people's foolishness.

Now, look at me at verse 17, see what Memuchin is predicting here. For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought into his presence, and she did not come. Memuchin here is predicting a mass rebellion by all the wives in Persia because of one example from Queen Vashti. Blown way out of proportion, yes. But it does reflect something about the way Memu can use authority. And it's pretty common. It's the way the world views authority. The world views authority as a zero-sum game. That if someone is in authority, it's because they took it from someone else. And your goal, if you have any kind of power or authority, is to try to keep it for yourself. Don't let anyone take your power away. This happens a lot in marriages. It comes from both sides. You're on the one side. Oh, if you're a woman, you gotta make sure that you don't join bank accounts. You gotta make sure that you have a job and you're doing all these things. You gotta make sure that you keep your power. You don't let him, you don't get dependent on your husband, because if you do, then he's got the power. And then from the husband's side, from the man's side, we hear, oh man, you gotta make sure that you keep your bank account separate. You gotta make sure that you keep your wife in line because if you don't, then she gets the power and your whole life falls apart. Friends, that's the way the world views power and authority.

Look at the way Jesus talked about it when he talked to his disciples. He said, those who bear power, bear authority among the Gentiles, lord it over them and call them benefactors. But not so among you. Whoever would be greatest among you must be a servant. That's Christian authority. That's authority Christ's way. It applies to the church, elders. This is the way you should be using authority. It applies to Christians who are in state. There's a reason we call them civil servants. And it applies in the home.

Want another passage? Ephesians chapter five. Husbands, love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. True Christian authority is not about power plays. It's about sacrifice. It's about putting aside your needs and your desires for those who are under your authority, for their good. Sacrifice.

Memuchin doesn't understand that. He's a man of the world. And so he makes this bold prediction. Now, if Memuchin's diagnosis is bad, his cure is even worse. Look with me at verse 19. If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him, and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti should come no more into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. And when the king's edict which he shall make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all the women will give honor to their husbands, great and small.

Now, remember what the original problem was that Memuchin said would happen. All these women are gonna hear about this and it's gonna be a problem. So what's the solution? We're gonna publish abroad this whole situation so everyone knows what happened. Not a great plan. And then the punishment for Vashti. It's meant to be sort of an ironic punishment, like, you didn't come when the king called you? Fine, now you can't come at all. But it doesn't really come off that way. It comes off as more, you know, cruel and childish. And so we see here another example of a selfish tyrant working to please himself rather incompetently.

And, you know, we look around at the world and, you know, it's, that seems sort of familiar. And we ask that question again, who's in charge here? What's really going on here? Is God really sovereign? Is he still in control? Well, that moves us to our last point, a sovereign God. See, this isn't the end of the story, is it? This is just the first

chapter. See, God was at work even in this. The fact that Queen Vashti gets deposed is the reason that Esther attains the throne. And why does Esther attain the throne? Why did God put her there? He put her there because one day another advisor of the king will suggest another edict. An edict that would have meant the end for all God's people. All God's people would have been slaughtered and with them the promise of the Messiah.

And here we have a God working in and through the wickedness of King Ahasuerus to protect his people. And notice how God did it. He didn't do it by overriding the will of King Ahasuerus. And he didn't do it by justifying King Ahasuerus' actions. He did it in and through his wickedness. Was King Ahasuerus concerned about the welfare of the Jewish people when he deposed Vashti? No, he deposed Vashti because he is a wicked, selfish tyrant that got his feelings hurt. And yet, God was at work even in his wickedness to bring about his goodwill. And if God can do that, then he can work through the wicked, selfish tyrants' dealings in our world today.

There's this thought out there that in order for God to truly be on the throne, in order for God to truly make a difference in our world, that we need Christian leadership, we need to make sure we have Christian empires, Christian presidents, Christian congressmen, and yes, I pray that we have more Christian congressmen. I love it when Christians do that, if it's their vocation, it's great. But friends, God does not need righteous men in office to accomplish his will. He can use wicked men just as well. He is sovereign.

And you know what? This isn't even exhibit A. Y'all know where I'm going. When Caiaphas brought Jesus before the Sanhedrin and tried him, was he concerned about making sure there would be a sacrifice for sin? No. No, he brought Jesus in because he was jealous, because he was afraid that the Romans would clamp down on him. When Jesus was brought before Herod, did Herod dismiss him back to Pilate because he knew that Jesus had to die to be a sacrifice for sin and he needed to rise again on the third day to bring the promise of resurrection life to all his people? No, Herod did it because he was miffed and disappointed. He wanted Jesus to work a miracle for him and he didn't, so he sent him back to Pilate. When Pilate washed his hands of Jesus and put him away to be crucified, did he do that because he'd read the prophecy of Isaiah, he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities? No, he did it because Jesus was a political inconvenience. And yet, God took the wicked, selfish, incompetent actions of those wicked men and brought about the salvation of all his people.

This is the God we serve. He is on the throne. Who's in charge here? God's in charge here. So we've seen this great banquet, the height of human power, the height of human extravagance, but also the height of human depravity. Where does that depravity lead? Well, it leads to a drunken command. unlawful command. And when it's not performed, the king becomes angry and that anger leads to, well, a very foolish decree. But all the while, a sovereign God was at work in and through those very wicked actions to bring about good for his people. We can trust God. He's in charge here.

Let's pray. Father in heaven, I thank you that you are in charge here. that you're in charge everywhere, that there is not one maverick molecule in the universe outside of your sovereign control, that the king's heart is like a stream of water. You turn it whatever direction you will. Lord, that's good news for us because you have promised in your word that you are working all things for the good of those who love you and are called according to your purpose. Pray, Lord, help us to trust you more. Help us take comfort in this and not not in such a way that we decide to do nothing, that we sit back and wait for your providence to work itself out, but that we take comfort from it, that when we have done our duty, when we have done what you command, that even though it looks like we fail, you're still on the throne. We ask that in Jesus' name, amen.