

Kingdom in Crisis
Esther 1:1-12
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I have enjoyed the Netflix series, “The Crown” that has won multiple Emmy Awards and captured the interest of many Americans.

I am especially intrigued by the episodes that portray both Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip as Christian believers. Yet, I am also fascinated by the depictions of daily life in the royal court.

The English royals seem, I don’t know, maybe more interesting than American politicians and through there has been plenty of scandal and controversy over the years, there was something about the celebration of Queen Elizabeth’s 70 years on the throne, last month, that made me feel proud, even though I am not a citizen of the Commonwealth and have no desire to be.

Well, folks, today we will explore life in another royal court. This one is far removed from Buckingham Palace, but I think it is even more intriguing.

Today, our journey through the Old Testament book of Esther involves exploring Chapter 1, verses 1-12. Since this is not only a true story but also God’s Word for us in this room, let’s pause and pray that we would hear and heed that message today.

Esther 1:1-2 “Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces,² in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel,

Now, some of you may feel hopelessly confused already, because your Bible version says King Xerxes, not Ahashwerosh. Xerxes is his name in Greek and Ahashwerosh is his name in Hebrew. Incidentally, the name does not mean anything in Hebrew, but does sound similar to the term for “headache”! I was tempted to use a “Xerxes” Bible version because it is only two syllables but decided just to be grateful I did not have to use the King’s Persian name: Khshavarshan.

Ahashwerosh was the Persian king from 486-465 B.C. His grandfather, Cyrus the Great, had

defeated the Babylonians in 539 BC and established the Persian-Median Empire, which was the world’s largest and most powerful at the time. It included 127 provinces spanning from India to Ethiopia.

We know quite a bit about Ahashwerosh from the Greek historian Herodotus. His account is in essential agreement with what we read in Esther.

When there is disagreement on any details, I am confident the writer of Esther got it right and Herodotus may have been mistaken.

Susa, located in what is now SW Iran, was one of the four capital cities of the Persian Empire.

It was a winter palace because it was too hot in the summer for the royal court.

Esther 1:3a “In the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants.”

The events in the Book of Esther cover a span of about 10 years, 483 to maybe 473 BC. Remember, with BC we count the years backwards.

Esther 1:3b-5 “The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him,⁴ while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days.⁵ 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.

From Herodotus, we learn Ahashwerosh’s goal in all this activity involves raising an army – a HUGE army – to battle the Greeks. The seven day feast is a culmination of six months of the King likely trying to convince everyone that he was wealthy and powerful enough to lead Persia to victory over the Greeks and reward those who chose to fight in his army.

That is why Esther 1:6-7 “There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods^[a] and marble

pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry (a reddish engrained quartz or another crystal), marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones.⁷ Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king.

The wealth of Ahashwerosh was likely substantial. A century later, Alexander the Great would enter the palace in Susa and find 1200 tons of gold and silver bullion: TONS! As well as 270 tons of minted gold coins, all which had been accumulated by the Persian kings.

The royal wine: alcohol plays a significant role in the story. Esther 1:8 And drinking was according to this edict: “There is no compulsion (or restriction).” For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.

In ancient Persia, the believe apparently was that people would make better decisions when they were drunk. Why? Because they would be more “in tune” with the spiritual realm, less reliant on reason, and less inhibited. We understand, and the Bible tells us, that too much alcohol impairs one’s judgement.

However, in the Royal Court of Susa, moderate intoxication was viewed as an asset when negotiating important decisions.

Okay: that is Act 1, Scene 1 of Esther. We have King Ahashwerosh, a Pagan Ruler who is the most powerful man on the planet. He seems to hold the Jewish people in that city in the palm of his hand. He could crush them at any time for any reason. The story of Esther is about how that does NOT happen.

Next, the focus turns to Scene 2:

Esther 1:9 Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. According to Herodotus, the King’s wife was Amestris. Whether Vashti is her Hebrew name, or if she is another wife of Ahashwerosh , we cannot be sure. According to Jewish tradition, Vashti is the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian ruler who conquered Jerusalem, though that is uncertain.

The main point is that Vashti is the queen and plays an important role in the story.

Esther 1:10,11 “On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, (meaning quite intoxicated) 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, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.”

Some suggest the seven eunuchs were to carry a royal litter and provide a grand entrance of Vashti into the royal banquet hall. Vashti likely possessed some natural beauty, but the implication is that when she is brought to this feast she will be provocatively dressed to provide “entertainment” for a bunch of drunken men.

Esther 1:12a “But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command delivered by the eunuchs.” WOW! This does not happen in the royal court. The King’s commands are to be obeyed. Vashti has a lot of “chutzpah”!

Esther 1:12b “At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.”

The ruler of the Persian Empire, the most powerful man on the planet, is FURIOUS! That is not a good thing, and we will see what happens as we continue the story next week. But the LORD has things to say to us in the portion of His Word.

However, I first want to mention somethings the LORD is NOT saying to us in the 1st chapter of Esther.

#1 He is not saying drinking too much leads to big problems. Oh, the Bible says that Proverbs 20:1 Wine is a mocker, strong drink is a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise.” In fact, a new British study just came out and said no one under 40 should drink alcohol, PERIOD. That, however, is not the point of Esther.

Many things happen in this book. It is only natural for us to approve of some things and disapprove of

others. To admire some people and to despise others. However, if we let them become the focus, we miss what God is saying to us through this portion of His Word.

We always need to avoid the temptation to just use the Bible to support our beliefs and preferences and instead really listen to what the LORD has to say to us. In our culture, alcohol abuse is a big problem. It is a good thing to encourage people to practice self-control, moderation, and temperance, but this is not really what Esther 1 is about.

#2 This passage is not about husband-and-wife relationships. Martin Luther, who wasn't a fan of the book anyway, talked about Vashti as being an example of a rebellious wife. He claimed her refusal to submit and do what her husband commanded was grounds for divorce.

On the other hand, modern feminists have admired Vashti and commended her refusal to be used by her husband as a sex object. Some of them draw a contrast between Vashti and Esther, claiming Vashti is a good role model while Esther is not. Others, however, say that both women are to be admired: Vashti for resisting the King's demands, and Esther for manipulating him.

Friends, male-and-female relationships, husband-and-wife relationships, can be very complicated. The Bible has much to say about these topics. However, the Book of Esther is not where to go to find out how men and women should relate to each other.

So, what should we learn from this passage this morning?

Three things:

#1 We should recognize the role this opening scene plays in the Book of Esther. After reading this passage, we, too, should feel a sense of awe at the power that the pagan king Ahashwerosh possesses.

Not only does the King have great power, he wields it rather unpredictably. Sometimes his decisions are rooted in dubious motives and sometimes his

judgement is significantly impaired as he makes those decisions. We should recognize that living in the Persian Empire, under his rule, might be a very dangerous thing for the Jewish people. That is the background for the Book of Esther.

It is, in a sense, a David and Goliath story. The Persian King and his forces are a giant, like Goliath. The Jewish people are seemingly insignificant, like David. All the odds are against the Jews.

How can they ever survive if these powerful foes turn against them? Yet, in the end, it will once again be not David laying on the ground, but Goliath.

Even though, from a human standpoint all the odds are against them, through God's power, the Jewish people in Esther will not only survive but thrive.

Sometimes things will look very dark. Sometimes it will seem all hope is lost. But God *will not fail* His people. He will preserve them.

Friends, for some of you, it seems like the odds are against you right now. Health issues, financial challenges, family conflicts, emotional problems, there just doesn't seem to be a lot of hope and there are some Goliaths out there, or King Ahashwerosh: powerful people that oppose you, or situations that just seem overwhelming.

Yet, this is not a time to be afraid. Now is not the time to be intimidated. It is a time to keep trusting and following Jesus – day after day, year after year, decade after decade. If you belong to the LORD, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, you can be confident that He will never fail you. Philippians 1:6 “And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.” Friend, the LORD will bring you safely home: be of good cheer.

#2. We should realize that we do not need to be afraid, of do not need to be intimidated by, the mighty and powerful. The author of Esther, inspired by God, introduces us to the Persian King, Ahashwerosh, in all of his glory. He is a very wealthy and powerful man. Writing a few decades

after the events described, the author and his original readers knew, however, that this wealth and power did not last.

Herodotus and other historians tell us that just four years after this grand feast showcasing and celebrating the power of Persia, Ahashwerosh and his army are decisively defeated by the Greek forces in the Battle of Hellespont. At that point, the king's wealth and power takes a big hit and is seriously diminished.

The author could have introduced us to Ahashwerosh as "The King who lost a very important battle", but instead he describes the pagan king at his peak. This seems to be a subtle reminder to his original readers: that wealth and power can vanish very quickly.

This can be a lesson for us from Esther, Chapter 1 and it is a lesson we should learn from even a quick glance at history.

The world has been full of powerful and wealthy pagan leaders who, at one time, seemed invincible, but have ended up on the ash heap of history. The 20th Century saw the rise and fall of Hitler's 3rd Reich and of the evil empire of Soviet communism.

When I was in college in the 1970's, I remember thinking there was no hope of freedom ever coming to Russia or to the peoples of Eastern Europe. But then, in 1987, President Reagan demanded "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall" and within a few years the entire Soviet empire crumbled.

When that happened, I remember reading Psalm 2 and thinking: Wow!

Psalm 2:1-4 Why do the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain?

²The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and against his Anointed, saying,

³"Let us burst their bonds apart and cast away their cords from us."

⁴He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision.

I thought of Lenin, Stalin, and all the Soviet leaders proclaiming, "There is not God" and calling Christianity "nothing but a fairy tale." But their empire crumbled while God remains on His throne. Whatever happens in the political realm today or in the future, here in the US or in another part of the world, we know it is all temporary, all rather short-lived.

What is certain and what makes us secure, is that one day the angel will say, Revelation 11:15 "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever."

#3 We need to recognize how God is always working out His plan, whether we realize it or not. At certain times in history, such as when Moses led the people of Israel out of Egypt, or when Jesus was here on earth, God performed extraordinary miracles to accomplish His purposes. But many times, most of the time, God uses ordinary events to bring about what He desires. This is called divine providence.

We should remember that God is the One, as the Apostle Paul says, Ephesians 1:11b "Who works all things according to the counsel of his will."

As we go through Esther, we will note how that occurs. Here is what we see in the 1st Chapter: a pagan king, who neither knows nor cares about the True God, gives a banquet for purely worldly reasons. On the last day of the feast, he decides to treat the men of his empire to a good look at his beautiful queen, Vashti. His motives are not good, but his decision sets in motion a chain of events that becomes the Story of Esther.

When Vashti, again not a believer in the God of the Bible, chooses to refuse the king's command, she probably does not realize it will mean being deposed from her position and she certainly does not know that it will mean that one day a young Jewish girl, named Esther, will take her place.

Ahashwerosh and Vashti make their choices freely, but they do so under the umbrella of God's sovereignty and the Lord uses their choices to accomplish His will.

But what if the king would not have called for Vashti to come? What if Vashti would not have refused his command?

I don't know what would have happened, but I do know that a billion years before the events occurred in Susa in 483 BC, God knew EXACTLY what each of those individuals was going to do and He wove all these decisions and all these events together to do what he had chosen to do.

Again, when we think of the LORD accomplishing His plan, we often think of great miracles that display God's power. But these mighty acts of God are linked together by a long chain of seemingly insignificant, ordinary events.

I love what Karen Jobes says about this passage from Esther: "We are now living in one of those long stretches of history between the ascension and return of Jesus Christ. Like Xerxes of long ago, modern kings, presidents, and rulers make decisions from purely political motives. Like Vashti, people today unwittingly make decisions

that have long-reaching consequences far beyond what they could have foreseen. These events may be completely secular and perhaps made by people who give Christ no thought. *Nonetheless, through them God is moving all of history forward to accomplish all that must happen before the return of his Son, Jesus Christ, the true King of kings.*"

So, friends, the lesson for us is trust God. He knows what He is doing. Trust God. Do not be afraid, do not be worked, do not even be anxious.

Though you may not be able to see that God is at work, though you might think "He must have forgotten about me", the Bible assures us He is working today, right now, to accomplish His purpose and that purpose will always include His glory and, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ, your ultimate good.

So, be of good cheer. In the midst of the confusion and craziness of this world, the Lord can be trusted. By God's grace, may we trust Him and obey Him today.