

Esther 1:1-12 'The Folly Of A King'

Brothers and sisters, may I suggest that one of the main things that flows through the book of Esther is encapsulated in the second part of chapter 4:14: "and who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" You see, what Mordecai was saying to his cousin Esther is that it may well be for this very purpose that God has placed you in this very position right at this time, for the deliverance of His people!

"Who knows?" You see, regardless of what many espouse in God's Name, and also what God has supposedly told them, *we do not know*. No we don't know what the specifics are that God has planned for our futures. Although it is true that King David wrote Psalm 139:15-16 "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depth of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

Yes although this is true, we do not know the specific ins and outs of the days, weeks, months and years of what lies ahead! Will they be health and prosperity? Sadness and sorrows? Hardships, ease, victories or defeats or all of the above? His particular plans for us we do not know. But God knows! That is why we are to serve, obey and honour Him by faith. We are trusting in, the unseen God for the unknown days of our future. Trusting that He loves us, and relying upon the weaving of His universal sovereignty throughout all of our lives, as we keep in mind Romans 8:28 "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

And that is what we are going to see throughout the whole of the book of Esther. God preserves, perseveres and delivers His covenant people, out of the hands of those who would destroy them. And of course ultimately, this points us to Christ upon the cross. Our great Redeemer king!

These events occurred during that time in which the second group of the Exiles, who were carried off by Nebuchadnezzar when the Babylonians brought the southern Kingdom of the Jews and Jerusalem to its knees. In 538 BC under Zerubbabel the first group returned. 80 years later in 458 under Ezra the priest the second group and then in 432 BC under the governor Nehemiah the final group were repatriated. So yes these things that we are going to look at occurred during the years of this second repatriation under the reign of king Xerxes, also known in Hebrew Ahasuerus but I will just call him Xerxes, it's much easier!

Now according to historians, this king was a fierce military campaigner and he prospered in this, until his disastrous attempt at an attack upon Greece which failed miserably at a place called Salamis in 480 BC. So he ceased making war and would eventually retire spending his days between his two palaces. One at Persepolis and the other at Susa. And although he was fierce in battle, apparently he was a weak willed man both personally and politically. So he was very easily influenced and swayed by the flattery and talk of those with whom he surrounded himself, as we will see.

We will also see the struggles that we have when we seek to live in both worlds at once. Esther will be called on to decide to whom is it that she truly belongs. As ultimately we all must do! Are we part of Christ's Kingdom, or with compromise, are we seeking to be part of both worlds? So it is during the time of Xerxes' third year do these following events occur.

And the final thing that we need to take note of is that though the sovereign Hand and Rule of God is woven throughout the whole book, His Name is never mentioned. Not even once! There have even been those throughout the millennia who have suggested that the book of Esther should not even have been part of the Bible. But praise God that He rules over all things, and particularly His Word. And clearly, since the focus of the book is God Sovereignly preserving His people, it is where it needs to be!

Now the Persian Empire at that time was vast. In Daniel and Nebuchadnezzar's time, they were 120 provinces, but now during the reign of Xerxes there are "127 provinces." Stretching from India to Ethiopia. And what's interesting at the outset, is that what this king is doing, is exactly what Jesus would warn of in one of His parables some 500 years later in Luke 12:13-21: "Someone in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me." Jesus replied, "Man, who appointed me a judge or an arbiter between you?" Then he said to them, "Watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them this parable, "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, "What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops." Then he said, "This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy, eat, drink and be merry." But God said to him, "You fool. This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God."

Yes "watch out," "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." Yes things are simply always and only just that: things. Whether a person's possessions are great or small it matters not, because their things, are not who they are. No the who they are that really matters, is who they are before God! So as we enter into this king's life and world we see firstly, that he was a man of tremendous wealth, but also a man of tremendous vanity. He has two palaces that he tends to travel between. Perhaps one for the winter and one for the summer when not at war. And like the man in the parable, he has big barns and he knows how to live. And notice how it begins. "This is what happened."

Friends, there is a tendency by many who when coming to the Old Testament view these things recorded therein as some kinds of myths or legends. That is why I never use the word story when I am speaking on any part of the Bible. It sets the wrong image from the outset. I always use the words account, or narrative, depending on the literature. And to prove my point, this is what we have before us. The writer speaks as someone who knows the facts. "This is what happened during the time of Xerxes." And friends I simply make this point so that we have engrained within our minds, that as with the New Testament, we are speaking about the Truth of God! Not speculations, not made up things and not hearsay. "All scripture is God breathed," yes "All scripture." "This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush." So firstly we have this declaration of the King's far reaching wealth and power, and now his burning need to show it off to everyone. V2-3 "At that time king Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa. And in the third year of his reign he gave a great banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes and the nobles of the provinces were present." Yes like most wealthy insecure people, he has a burning need to show and tell people just how great he is. So he invites everybody who is anybody to come to eat of the king's fair and pay homage to his astounding wealth, benevolence and majesty! Although we sing it to God,

it is basically, O worship the king all glorious above. And for a full six months, “180 days” they partied on. Yes as I said the goal was clear. O worship the king all glorious above!

Look at v4 as the narrative continues: “For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his Kingdom and the splendour and glory of His Majesty.” Friends, what I find interesting is that though the book of Esther does not mention God's Name, the way it speaks of this king is the way that we speak of God. And clearly, that is the writers intention, to show the vanity of men when they have not God in their minds or in their hearts! And this is a trap which is really easy for us all to fall into. We don't need to be the king of a kingdom; we can just seek to be the king of our own Kingdom!

As Jesus Himself explained in Matthew 16:26 “For what would it profit a man if he gains the whole world and yet forfeits his soul? And what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” Yes what would it profit us if we gained everything that's worthless and yet lost everything of any real value? “And what can a man give in exchange for his soul?” What could we possibly offer up to God in place of the life of His Own Son? What would we say to someone who had sacrificed their one and only child that we might be saved? Here`s \$10 million? Here`s my house?

No Beloved we have nothing of value that God Himself has not given us in the first place. Yes nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. And of course Jesus is not talking literally about the whole world here, but as I just mentioned our own world that we have made ourselves king of! No we do not need to be a king to fall into this trap. Ecclesiastes 12:13-14 “Now all has been heard here is the conclusion of the matter. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgement including every hidden thing, whether good or evil.”

Beloved, by God's grace and mercy, one of the greatest tools that we can possess in our walk with Him, is a sober assessment of ourselves. “The whole duty of man” begins with the “fear of the Lord.” Indeed Proverbs 9:10 says “the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. And knowledge of the Holy One, this is understanding.” Not that we live in terror of Him and flee from Him no. Christ has overcome that for us at the cross. No, we are not as the Israelites were at the foot of Mount Sinai in Exodus 20:18-19 “When the people saw the thunder and the lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance and said to Moses. Speak to it yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.”

No we do not live in fear of God like that anymore. But a sober assessment, yes a reverential respectful fear of God is one of His greatest blessings, one of His greatest mercies, and also one of the greatest weapons that we can have in our armoury, as we do battle with our sin and seek to walk with Him! Because it reminds us that He is God and we are not. That He is the Creator of the universe and that we are His adopted children. Yes He loves us so much that he gave His only Son for us. But we are not naturally born into God's family, no. We are supernaturally purchased through Jesus` Blood and sacrifice for adoption into His Kingdom!

Romans 12:3 Paul says. “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you. Do not think more highly of yourself than you ought to my face but has given you.” Yes we can all fall into the trap of thinking of ourselves as royalty by thinking of ourselves, not with “sober judgement” but as a king sitting upon a throne. Look at where such things have led this man. Not to “the beginning of wisdom,” not to “the whole duty of man.” But to the unbridled vanity of 180 days of endless eating and drinking for the impressing of the movers and the shakers in his astonishing display of hey, look at me! And then after those days had finished v5, he held another “seven day feast for all the people high and low” who lived in the citadel. So all of those who lived within the protection of the castle

compound and its surrounding lands within the fortified limits. And held especially for them within the king's private garden. Yes it says, "everyone from the least to the greatest." No one was going to miss out on this display of what some might call generosity, while others seeing things from a different perspective might call it sin and debauchery!

Dear friends, I know that I am stating the obvious, but we do need to be very careful about the kinds of messages that we are sending when we have gatherings in our homes, or we attend such things in other places. According to the scriptures, everything that we involve ourselves in paints a picture of other people's perceptions of us, doesn't it? And if as we saw in 2 Peter that our goal is to proclaim Christ, glorify God and to "hasten his coming" having too much food, having too many wines or having too many beers, or a loose-language mouth, will never do it. No the glory doesn't go to God when we are involved in such things. In effect, we rob Him of that glory when we carry His Name with conduct unbecoming!

1 Corinthians 10:31 says "so whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God."

But of course with this Pagan king, the glory of God is the last thing that is in focus here! And I want us to try and grasp the sheer scale and extreme opulence of it all. V6 "The gardens had hangings of what and blue linen." So those covered areas where people ate and drank were draped in the finest of materials. No \$99 bargain cabanas from Bunnings here, no. The silk like covered tents were "fastened with white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars." Now the stating of the colours is significant here, because one pound of pre dyed wool, was worth a pound of gold!

Purple and some other colours were very rare and considered only for royalty. As the description continues. "There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl and other costly stones." Now I didn't know what "porphyry" was so I had to look it up. It was a dark reddish and purple rock that contained crystals of granite and other precious materials. Wow. As a builder it sounds like an amazing material to me. And this was the path, that had been prepared for the people to walk upon.

Many years ago the musician Paul Simon recorded a song with a line in it that said, she had diamonds on the soles of her shoes. Well these people didn't have diamonds on the soles of their shoes, but basically, they had diamonds under their feet. Such was this display of opulence, arrogance and wealth. Look at v7 "Wine was served in goblets of gold, (and don't miss this) each one different from the other." But it was not as Sue jokingly suggested on Monday night, "O poor fellow, he didn't even have a full set". It was that every single golden cup was a one-off. No mass production here. No two were alike!

Again, this display of wealth was really mind blowing. And no wonder, because as Tom explained at Bible study, there are basically three recognised great conquerors of the ancient world: Genghis Khan, Alexander the Great and this Xerxes. Again his empire was vast. And "the royal wine was abundant in keeping with the King's liberality". V8 The wine stewards had been given the orders that you could drink as much as you wanted or as little as you wanted. But friends as we will now see, after 187 days of showing everyone how amazing he is, how wealthy he is and also how all powerful he is, we now see that in effect, (as the commentator puts it) the emperor has no clothes. Because his great authority and power, doesn't seem to reach even under his own roof! V9-11 "Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of king Xerxes. On the 7th day when the king was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him to bring before him queen Vashti wearing her royal crown, (and notice the words) in order to display her beauty to

the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.” So the way it reads is this. Everyone has seen how much more superior the king is to them all in all things. And now he would have the queen brought out, so the men would envy him for his woman as well! How hot is the queen? The king has got it all in spades, he wanted them all to think.

Friends, this man's vanity knew no bounds. He had stoked his own ego and after seven days he'd had a skinful to drink, and now he would parade his queen for all, to perhaps even lust and envy after! But as the Proverb says 16:18 “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” Now had the king not been “in high spirits from wine,” (I believe he was drunk, you can disagree with me that's fine) but had he not been in this state perhaps he might not have done what he did, we don't know. But what we do know is this: That many a person has gotten their lack of inhibitions, courage and neglect of self-control out of the bottom of a bottle. And in our day it is also from illicit drugs. We saw in 2Peter that we are not to be “mastered,” or enslaved by anything.

And let's try and peer into the scene a bit more. If the king was drunk it's a valid assumption that many others were also. Matthew Henry explains that it was against Persian custom for women to appear in public as such. So to do this in such a manner was a belittling and disgraceful thing. To even parade the queen as if upon some catwalk before a bunch of drunks. Yes he'd shown off all his riches and now he would show off his jewel in the crown! V12 “But when the attendants delivered the king's command, queen Vashti refused to come.” Notice the word “command” In v8 he had even given a “command” that everyone was allowed to drink as much or as little as they wanted. This king exerted his power whenever he could. He would make a public display of the queen, but now he will make a drunken public display of himself! “Then the king became furious and burned with anger.” And may I add, for all to see.

Beloved, how different the scriptures speak of the way a husband should love his wife. “As Christ loved the church and laid down his life for her.” That selfless, self-sacrificing love, who thinks of their wife before themselves because to love their wife is to love themselves, because the two are one! Yes “for this reason will a man leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and the two will become one flesh.” The king didn't request that his wife come. He “commanded that she be brought.” He summoned her. In all reality disrespecting her. And his folly fell back on his own head!

Friends, clearly the way husbands, fathers and grandfathers treat their wives sends a message to children of how things ought to be in a married relationship. We need to make sure that it's the right message! Now why the queen refused to come we don't know. Was it arrogance, or was it propriety we don't know. The commentator explains that she wasn't summoned only once, but again and again and again. Perhaps while everybody waited in anticipation, which caused the King's anger to burn even more. Ironically, the footnote to her story is that she would outlive the king, and have influence over their son who succeeded Xerxes. The man Artaxerxes!

But that's where we leave the narrative today. Friends as I closed this morning, we just need to keep in mind that all of these things are being orchestrated by God, for His plan and purposes. A Pagan king in a Pagan land, placed in power by God for the purpose of the deliverance of His people. Yes, Romans 8:28 “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and have been called according to his purpose.”

Let's pray!