

"THE KING OF HEAVEN LAUGHS AT THE EARTHLY KING"

I. Introduction

- A. The book of Esther was written to explain the origins of the feast of Purim, which celebrates how God delivered Israel from annihilation when they were threatened by a powerful enemy.
 - 1. Esther is a book that shows how God's purposes for his covenant people cannot be thwarted, not even when our enemies have all the power and we have none.
 - 2. The story of Esther also reminds us that God, whose name is never mentioned in this book, often works in hidden ways.
- B. The events in Esther take place a little more than fifty years after the Persian king Cyrus issued the decree that allowed the Jews to return to Palestine and rebuild the temple.
 - 1. While a number of Jews returned to Palestine, there were many others who stayed behind in Persia.
 - 2. The odds were not in favor of those Jewish exiles being able to maintain their distinct identity as God's covenant people.
 - 3. Yet in the book of Esther we see God protecting and preserving them by providentially guiding the course of events that unfolds.

II. The Earthly King's Splendor

- A. The book of Esther begins by introducing us to the king of Persia and describing the circumstances that set the stage for what takes place in the rest of the book.
 - 1. In Esther's day, the Persian empire was ruled by a man named Ahasuerus, who was also known by his Greek name, Xerxes.

2. Ahasuerus reigned from 486 to 465 BC.
 3. The description of his kingdom in this chapter places a strong emphasis upon his greatness.
 4. He ruled over a swath of land that stretched from India (modern day Pakistan) to Ethiopia (modern day Sudan).
 5. His dominion was divided into 127 provinces.
 6. The writer tells us that Ahasuerus' magnificence was put on display during this period of celebration: "he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days."
- B. This celebration was held in the third year of Ahasuerus' reign.
1. It did not take place right away because Ahasuerus had to deal with significant uprisings in Egypt and Babylon when he first came to his throne.
 2. The festivities described here were held to celebrate how he had put down those rebellions.
 3. And what a celebration it was.
 4. It stretched over a six month period, culminating in a week-long feast for a huge crowd.
 5. The decor at the feast was extremely opulent, and the writer makes special mention of the fact that the royal wine flowed freely.
 6. It was the sort of thing that the vast majority of people in the Persian empire would not even be able to imagine.
 7. But for the privileged few, life at court was extravagant, especially at times like this.

- C. Ahasuerus did not host this celebration because he was generous and kind-hearted.
1. A key factor that motivated him was that he wanted to create an opportunity to drum up support for the military campaign that he would soon be starting in Greece.
 2. This was a man who knew how to get what he wanted.
 3. He used his riches to convince people of the greatness of his power.
 4. And by doing so, he also impressed upon people that it was in their best interests to go along with whatever he wanted them to do.
- D. There is one other detail in the first part of this passage that tells us something about how far Ahasuerus' authority extended.
1. In verse 8, the writer tells us that the drinking at this feast "was according to this edict: 'There is no compulsion.'"
 2. In other words, this king had so much control over his subjects that a special edict had to be issued in order to give them the freedom to drink as much or as little as they wanted.
 3. If Ahasuerus had not done this, his guests would have had to drink whenever he drank.
 4. And as we see in the next part of the passage, he did a lot of drinking over the course of those seven days.
- E. The key point that we need to see in verses 1 through 9 is that Ahasuerus was a man of immense power and prestige.
1. He was a man who was accustomed to getting what he wanted.
 2. This is a picture of man at the pinnacle of success.

3. People begin to think very highly of themselves once they make it to the top.
4. They have little tolerance toward anyone or anything that gets in their way.
5. But the events that unfold in the rest of this passage show us that Ahasuerus' power is not as impressive as it may seem.
6. Ahasuerus does not know it, but there is an infinitely greater King ruling over him.
7. And unlike Ahasuerus, the purpose and will of this King cannot be opposed.

III. The Earthly King's Humiliation

- A. In the next paragraph of chapter 1, our writer tells us that the heart of the king was merry with wine on the seventh day of the feast.
 1. As you can probably tell, this is simply another way of saying that the king was drunk.
 2. This in itself is something worth noting.
 3. For all that the first paragraph has to say about the king's majesty and power, here we see that he doesn't even have the ability to control himself.
- B. The king's lack of self-control resulted in a situation that was utterly humiliating for him.
 1. In his drunken estate, surrounded by all the fineries of his royal treasury, he decides that there is one more treasure that should be put on display.
 2. His wife, Queen Vashti, is a beautiful woman, and he wants to hear his subjects compliment him for having such a fine trophy wife.

3. So he orders the eunuchs to go fetch her from the feast that she is hosting for the women so she can stand before him and display her beauty and her royal splendor.
- C. But Vashti is not about to subject herself to the humiliation of being leered at by her husband's subjects.
1. She refuses to come at the king's command, which, predictably, causes him to become enraged.
 2. There is considerable irony in how this unfolds, especially when it is considered in light of what was said in the first part of the chapter.
 3. Ahasuerus is so great and powerful, yet he cannot compel his wife to do what he wants her to do.
 4. His kingdom stretches from India to Ethiopia, it is divided into 127 provinces, but his authority is being defied by someone in his own household.

IV. The Earthly King's Decree

- A. In the last part of our passage, we see the king consulting his counselors to determine how he should respond to such an outrage.
1. After Ahasuerus asks them, "what is to be done to Queen Vashti?", one of his counselors responds by pointing out that this matter is even more serious than the king may think.
 2. Not only has Vashti defied the authority of the king, she has also set a precedent that women throughout the kingdom are likely to follow.
 3. Once the ladies of the land hear about how Vashti put Ahasuerus in his place, what is to stop them from doing the same thing to their husbands?
 4. Here is more irony.

5. Persia was such a great kingdom, but here we see that the most important men in the kingdom are utterly terrified by the prospect of revolt in their own households.
 6. Their response to Vashti's actions exposes the grand flaw in how they think about power and authority.
 7. They may think that they have more power than all of the peoples around them (though the Greeks would soon prove that that was not the case), but they fail to see that there are some things that cannot be controlled by sheer might.
 8. The sword can be used to stamp out uprisings in Egypt, but a society won't last very long if men use the sword to bring their wives into subjection.
- B. After hearing the counsel of his advisors, the king decides to issue a decree.
1. The decree announces that Vashti is being deposed from her position as Queen and that she will be replaced by someone else.
 2. Vashti's punishment fits her crime.
 3. She refused to come when the king summoned her.
 4. Now, she will never again come before the king.
 5. It may have been fitting, but it was a decision that the king regretted after he cooled down, as we see in chapter 2.
 6. He made a bad decision in a fit of rage, and now he will have to live with the consequences.
- C. Ahasuerus' decree also addressed the societal crisis that was created by Vashti's defiance.

1. It said that every man should be master in his own household.
 2. Now, think about this law for just a moment.
 3. This might sound impressive at first.
 4. But how in the world could such a law be enforced?
 5. The husbands of Persia can try to lord it over their wives, but even if they are able to intimidate their wives into submission, they will never have their hearts.
 6. Once again, the writer is drawing our attention to this king's foolishness and impotence.
 7. Yes, he has the power to make laws, but he cannot compel people to obey them.
- D. One other thing to note about this law is that it did the exact opposite of what Ahasuerus intended.
1. He was trying to reassert himself and ensure that his people still held him in the highest regard.
 2. He was trying to save face.
 3. But by publishing this law in all 127 provinces of his kingdom, he simply ensured that everyone in the empire would hear about how Vashti had humiliated him.

V. Conclusion

- A. God is neither seen nor mentioned in this chapter.
1. He makes no appearance anywhere in the book of Esther.
 2. This is reflective of our experience in life.
 3. We do not see God.

4. He does not intervene in our affairs in observable ways.
 5. God is invisible to us.
 6. This passage reminds us that God's invisibility does not mean that he is not present or that he is not at work.
 7. God was clearly at work in this passage.
 8. He was orchestrating events in such a way to pave the way for Esther to become queen.
 9. And he would then work through Esther to deliver his people from the threat of annihilation.
- B. The message of Esther is so relevant for God's people today.
1. As one Old Testament scholar says, "[The book of Esther is for those times] when the forces arrayed against us seem all-powerful, when to laugh may be the only way to stay sane... [But this] is not to whistle in the dark, or to pretend that things are other than they are. It is to clothe ourselves with the truth that God is sovereign, and to be reminded that he is always with us, even when he seems most absent, and that nothing can ultimately thwart his purposes... [It] is to affirm that God is our deliverer, and to share in the laughter of heaven." [Webb, *Five Festal Garments*, 132-133]
 2. There are many forces in this world that are far more powerful than we are.
 3. Ahasuerus' power was so great that he could have exterminated an entire race of people if he saw fit to do so.
 4. We can be thankful that we live in a time and place in which we are not targeted in such a way by the powers that be.
 5. Of course, there are places in the world today where that is happening to Christians.

6. Our own situation could quickly change, and we need to be prepared for that possibility.
- C. But whatever our situation is vis-a-vis the powers that be, we always need to keep things in proper perspective.
1. One of the best ways to do this is not to take earthly power too seriously.
 2. We always need to remember that no matter who holds power on the earth, the Lord has set his King on his holy hill.
 3. Jesus is our King, and those who set themselves against his kingdom are doing something that is infinitely more foolish than what Don Quixote did when he tilted his lance at those windmills.
 4. The One seated in the heavens laughs at them, just as he laughed at Ahasuerus.
 5. The plans of even the most powerful earthly rulers are thwarted all the time, but the purposes of our God will stand forever.