

## Pomp, Power and Pride

- Esther 1
- Chapter two opens with these three words: **“After these things.”** If you were just reading the book and didn’t know any of the history, you would not know that there was a three year gap between chapters one and two, and the “these things” refers to an attempted invasion of the Greek city states by the Persian army, led by Xerxes, or Ahaseurus. It started out very promisingly, but then the Greeks rallied and defeated the Persians at the Battle of Salamis. Afraid of being trapped in Europe, Xerxes led his men into Asia, where many died of starvation and disease. When chapter two opens, the King has returned to Susa, greatly disappointed. Three years removed from the banquet and the wine and his anger against Vashti, he remembered her again, and what he had decreed against her. If this were a movie, I might open with King Ahasuerus returning to Susa with what’s left of his army, disappointed in his loss, missing some of his key men who were killed in battle, and then remembering that he also has no wife. That’s when the flashback begins...
- I have three headings for chapter one as we look at the story of a king and his queen. They are Pomp, Power and Pride.
- **Pomp**
- It was a banquet to end all banquets. It would put any state dinner in the White House to shame. It would make the wedding reception for Prince William and Kate look paltry and pathetic. It was even more elegant than the wedding and reception that has yet taken place, where Hannah and Isaiah and all their guests will feast on a three-course meal, topped off with samplings of various cakes and pies. That will be most impressive. But...the feast that King Ahaseurus put on lasted for 180 days. For six months, the King (verse 4) **“showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days.”** The guest list included the army of Persia and Media, the nobles and the governors of the 127 provinces, all the officials and servants who served at the king’s request; hundreds, maybe thousands of house guests for 180 days! But that wasn’t enough. No, just to make sure that everybody, great and small, got to see the pomp and the glory of the king, Ahaseurus extended the banquet for seven more days and invited all of the capital city of Susa to come and join in the feast. They came in by the thousands, maybe the tens of thousands. The court of the garden of the King’s palace was decorated to show off the King’s unlimited wealth, the guests were served wine in golden vessels while reclining on couches of gold and silver. And speaking of wine, it flowed. It was the best and it was unlimited, and the decree had gone out that as to drinking, there would be no compulsion. You could drink as much as you wanted, or as little as you liked. Or not at all. The normal custom was that you would only drink if the king or the queen were drinking, and you would immediately stop drinking if the king or the queen put down their glass. You would eat only when they ate and when they got up you got up and when they walked out, you did too. But not at this feast. The King had given his staff orders that the men could do whatever they liked. By the way, and this is important to the story, this was a feast just for the men of Susa. The women? They were not overlooked. But they were at their own banquet, hosted by none other than Queen Vashti. And even that little detail adds to the pomp of the king. They are meeting (see verse 9) **“in the palace that belonged to King Ahaseurus.”** Remember I said last week that though God is not mentioned once in the book of Esther, the king is mentioned 190 times in 167 verses. This king, King Ahaseurus, is the omnipotent one, at least in his own mind and in the mind of his subjects.
- **Power**
- How do we know the king was intoxicated with his own power? Archaeologists have found at Susa inscriptions in which the king refers to himself as, “The great king. The king of kings. The king of the land occupied by many races. The king of this great earth.”

- We also know that historians record that on one occasion, Ahasuerus executed the builders of a bridge because an ocean storm destroyed it; then he commanded that the water and waves be whipped and chained to punish the *sea*. That sounds a bit irrational, yes? But not when you are talking about the man who sees himself as the king of the world.
- The power of the king was unchallengeable. His word was final. Whatever the king wanted, he got. His will was to be done, in all the earth as it was in his own palace. There was no one in the kingdom that could stand against him. Except one.
- **Pride**
- Back to the seven-day feast. Here's the picture: Hundreds of men. Maybe thousands. Unlimited wine. No work, everybody's on holiday, paid for by the king. No wives, they're all with the queen. Just a bunch of worldly men drinking as much as they want for one whole week. You can imagine the scene. And right in the center of it is the King, bragging about his riches and his possessions and his building projects and his army (this is before he took on the Greeks) and his palace. He has a huge ego. He has a weak will. And he has a belly full of alcohol. That makes for a dangerous combination. See that in verse 10: "On the seventh day when the king's heart was merry with wine..." I couldn't help but think of Brad Paisley this week, and I know that some of you have never thought of Brad Paisley, but here are some of the lyrics to his country song, "Alcohol" (Alcohol is speaking): "I can make anybody pretty, I can make you believe any lie; I can make you pick a fight with somebody twice your size. I been known to cause a few breakups, I been known to cause a few births; I can make you new friends or get you fired from work. (Then the last verse): I've influenced kings and world leaders, I helped Hemingway write like he did; And I'll bet you a drink or two that I can make you put that lampshade on your head."
- The Bible is filled with references to wine. Back then, when you went to a banquet or a feast or somebody's house for dinner, they didn't ask you if you wanted water, coke or coffee. They served wine. It was seen as a blessing from God to have oil, wine and bread. Psalm 104:14-15 says as much. **"You cause the grass to grow for the livestock and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine and bread to strengthen man's heart."**
- We will not get off track here by debating the issue. But we also know that Solomon said, **"Wine is a mocker, strong drink a brawler, and whoever is led astray by it is not wise."** (Prov. 20:1) So like many things in God's creation, it can be a blessing or it can be a curse. It is the latter in this case, where the King is surrounded by hundreds of his subjects. The King's pride, fueled by alcohol which leads him astray, moves him to show off something to the men that they hadn't seen before. Probably never up close. They'd seen his golden wine goblets and gold and silver couches and the palace in all its splendor. Now, he thought, they are going to see my wife! I've shown off my power, my pomp, my provision. How about my prize? This is why Paul warned in Ephesians 5:18, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit." Debauchery. Make no mistake about it. The King was not asking for the Queen to come just so the men could meet her and bow to her on their way out. He is asking for her to come and be put on display. There has been much speculation as to what is meant by verse 11 where the king instructs his seven eunuchs to bring the queen **"with her royal crown, in order to show the people and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at."** If it meant that she was to come unveiled, so they could see her face, that would have been undignified and a violation of Persian custom. A woman's beauty was for the admiration and the enjoyment of her husband alone. Others have suggested that the King meant for her to come wearing ONLY her crown. That would make her refusal easy to understand. But either way, Vashti refused to come and be ogled by hundreds of drunken men.
- As I was meditating on this passage this week, and thinking about the pastors' conferences we will be doing in South Africa at the same time, it occurred to me that Ahasuerus really only had one of the 4 P's of godly leadership, and only the least important part of that one. He was a provider, but

only when it came to providing material possessions. The Queen did not lack for anything, as far as physical comforts, which may have been a source of the King's towering pride. Which sparked his rage when he heard that his wife would not obey him and come put herself on display. Listen. He may have been a **provider**, only for riches but not for vision. But the king was certainly not a **protector**. A husband that is a protector will put himself in harm's way before he will allow his wife to suffer. He would never make her an object for other men's lusts. **Prophet and Priest?** There's no way this man was hearing from God and speaking the truth with his wife, as a prophet, or going before God on her behalf on his knees as a priest. We don't see him praying with and for his wife, or teaching her the Scriptures, or dwelling with her in an understanding way so as to learn her heart and know how to minister to her needs. That's the furthest thing from the king's mind.

- He simply commands his eunuchs to go and give her a command. When she disobeys, he then turns to his counselors, his so-called wise men. These were the seven princes of Persia and Media, his trusted counselors who were versed in law and judgment. They were his cabinet members, his advisors. But sadly, the King has surrounded himself by men who have no more wisdom than he does. As a result, he ends up deposing his queen and banishing his wife from his presence! Listen, men. Do we understand that we can throw away in one moment of rage or indiscretion not just our wives but our character? Not to mention our legacy? It may be that when chapter 2 opens and the king is coming back in defeat from battle and he is thinking about the events from three years earlier, he felt remorse. *What was I thinking? How could I have done that to Vashti? She was my wife, my queen, the mother of our children?* Maybe he did. Either way, it was done.
- The rest of the chapter is a meeting between the king and his wise men. What is their greatest concern in this whole affair? Not with a broken marriage or a weak-willed king. No, their greatest concern is that when their wives and the women of the kingdom hear of what Vashti has done, they will all want to do it, too. Verse 17, "**For the queen's behavior will be made known to all the women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt.**" Then they suggest the king depose the queen, divorce his wife, and let there be an edict that goes out to every province (verse 22) that **every man be master in his own household!** That will do it. Now, women all across the kingdom, high and low, will make sure THEY honor THEIR husbands. Two thoughts come to mind.
- First, these men already had problems at home if that was their response. They need a command from the king mandating that they be the leaders in their homes? Second, it's ironic that they suggest the king make a law that will impose on others what he was not able to get done in his own house.
- Next week, Lord willing, we will meet the one who will become Miss Persia.