

Message #2

Esther 1:1-9

About 100 years before the events of Esther took place (486-465 B.C.), Daniel, in the first year of the King of Babylon, who was Belshazzar (555 B.C.), had a very strange dream which featured four great beasts (Dan. 7:1-7). Daniel interpreted each beast to be a representation of an earthly king who would dominate Israel (Dan. 7:17). Two years later (553 B.C.) he had another vision of a ram, who was very proud and powerful, who was closely connected with a city named Susa (Dan. 8:1-4). Daniel himself interpreted the ram to be a prediction of the kings of Media and Persia (8:20).

As the book of Esther opens, there is a description of a Persian king who was in Susa, who was powerful and prosperous. His name was Ahasuerus, better known by his Greek name, Xerxes. From all visible appearances, he was the king controlling the world. But when we remember the prediction of Daniel, we realize that everything about this king and his kingdom is both predicted and orchestrated by God. It was not Ahasuerus who was calling the shots, it was God!

EVEN WHEN THE ONE IN CHARGE IS POWERFUL, PROSPEROUS, DRUNK AND OBNOXIOUS, GOD IS STILL SOVEREIGNLY IN CONTROL, CARING FOR HIS PEOPLE AND WORKING OUT HIS WILL.

No matter how outlandish or corrupt things may appear, no matter how ruthless the individual, God is still sovereign. He is still providentially caring for His own and moving things in His direction. That is the story of Esther.

HISTORICAL FACT #1 – Ahasuerus’ kingdom was immense. 1:1

Ahasuerus was not only known as a great conqueror, but he was also known as a great builder. His father, Darius, had laid the framework for this massive kingdom, but it was Ahasuerus who consolidated, developed and built it.

He controlled all the land from India to Ethiopia, land so massive he divided it into 127 provinces so he could govern it. He invested much time, money and energy in building two cities: Susa and Persepolis.

In Ezra and Nehemiah, the focus is on God’s people returning to Jerusalem to worship God; in Esther, the focus is on God’s people seemingly lost and struggling, living in a massive Gentile world.

HISTORICAL FACT #2 – Ahasuerus’ throne was in Susa. 1:2

This city during Esther’s day was very famous and fortified. Susa was the great Persian capital and an important city of the Bible. Nehemiah appeared before Artaxerxes in Susa (Neh. 1:1; 2:1), Daniel received a vision from God under Belshazzar in Susa (Dan. 8:1-2), and many men had gone to Samaria and supported Israel from Susa (Ezra 4:9).

From a historical perspective, Susa was home to the ultimate of dominant political power.

From a Biblical perspective, Susa was a place where God was very present and very active.

The Hebrew words “royal throne” are important. The word “throne” actually speaks of a place that covers a person (Gesenius, *Hebrew Lexicon*, pp. 406-407). The word “royal” refers to one who reigns as king (*Ibid.*, p. 477). Combined, these words suggest that Susa was the place where the king lived and reigned and was covered and protected. Not only was it a city of great majesty, but one of great stability. As Joyce Baldwin writes: “It was a “strongly fortified palace complex within the city” (*Esther*, p. 56).

- 1) Key places of secular power still feature the sovereign presence and power of God.
- 2) No matter how powerful or protected one may be in a particular location, he is not covered and concealed from God.
- 3) No matter how powerful or glamorous one may temporarily be, without a proper focus on God, it will eventually wind up in ruins.

HISTORICAL FACT #3 – Ahasuerus’ put on massive banquets. **1:3-9**

Perhaps he was motivated by the political, for those who play the game of politics in building connections usually do put on banquets. Perhaps he was motivated by the party, for Ahasuerus simply loved good parties. In fact, the Hebrew word for “banquet” is one that refers to wine drinking (Gesenius, p. 521). It is a known fact that Xerxes loved parties and loved women. Baldwin says his exploits have “plenty of evidence” in history (Baldwin, p. 18).

Banquet #1 - The banquet for all key officials. **1:3-4**

The banquet was good politics. The irony is that Xerxes was eventually assassinated in 465 B.C. by his chief minister, Artabanus, who himself would have attended this banquet. So although this banquet was impressive, it still was not able to buy the loyalty of some.

(Feature #1) - It occurred in the third year of Ahasuerus’ reign. **1:3**

The year was 483 B.C.. It was a time of peace, tranquility, prosperity and success. In fact, Herodotus suggests that one of the reasons for this banquet was because Ahasuerus wanted to consult with his key military people in order to plan a strategy to invade and conquer Greece (John Whitcomb, *Esther*, p. 34).

(Feature #2) - It displayed Ahasuerus’ wealth, glory and splendor. **1:4a**

Baldwin says Ahasuerus inherited “unprecedented wealth” from Darius (p. 57).

(Feature #3) - It lasted 180 days. **1:4b**

One hundred eighty days is half a year. The king kept his high officials at this party for six months.

Banquet #2 - The banquet for all the people. **1:5-8**

(Feature #1) - This banquet was after the first banquet. **1:5a**

Ahasuerus was in a party spirit and decided to throw a final party for everyone; it was his grand finale bash which would last for seven days.

(Feature #2) - This banquet was for everyone. **1:5b**

These Hebrew words imply that it did not matter what the social status, all were invited.

(Feature #3) - This banquet was in the king's garden. **1:5c**

This banquet was held for all in the king's private palace garden (**7:7, 8**). This garden would have been a fortress-type environment.

(Feature #4) - This banquet displayed the king's wealth. **1:6**

The king displayed, for all to see, his great wealth and luxury.

(Feature #5) - This banquet featured heavy drinking. **1:7-8**

King Ahasuerus did not spare any expense; he used the best wine and all were invited to drink to their heart's content.

When the text says in **verse 8** that the drinking was done "according to the law," it is referring to the law of the Persian king. Everyone could drink according to their own desires. Each person could drink as much or as little as he wanted because the king had decreed it.

The Jewish people knew the dangers of drinking too much wine. Time and time again the O.T. warned the Jew to be very careful in drinking too much wine. Proverbs taught the children of Israel that wine is a " mocker" and one who gets drunk is not "wise" (Prov. 20:1). It taught the children of Israel to not even "look on the wine when it is red" for it "bites like a serpent" and will lead one to perversity and ruin (23:31-35). It taught the children of Israel that it is not fitting for kings to "drink wine" or "strong drink" (31:4-5). The Jews knew of the dangers of wine and clearly this kind of drunken bash was against the Word and will of God.

But the key question of Esther is this: is God still sovereign and still calling the shots when people are doing exactly the opposite of His Word or will? The answer is "Yes!"

God was in this episode working out His sovereign plan in order to protect and preserve His people.

Banquet #3 - The banquet for the women. **1:9**

There is nothing in **verse 5** that would indicate it was a men only banquet, but we do know from **verse 9** that Queen Vashti gave a women's only banquet in the king's palace.

J. G. McConville calls the banquet given by King Ahasuerus a "royal stag party."

It was not the usual custom for Persian women to have their own banquet apart from men, so this was a very rare banquet indeed. According to historians, women could be present at Persian meals; however, a banquet of many days which featured heavy drinking would certainly feature mostly men.

Don't be surprised if some of the people who you work for are people who behave in many god-less ways. Don't be surprised if their lives are lives of drunken debauchery. God is still in your plant. God is still in your company, He is still on your job. God is looking out for you and caring for you no matter how wild or bizarre. That is the story of Esther.