

Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous

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[0 : 00] We will start the book of Esther tonight, and although this book follows Nehemiah in our Bible, the events described in Esther take place 40 years before the first chapter of Nehemiah.

Perhaps what people remember most about the book of Esther is that it's one of two books in the Bible where God's name never is mentioned. The other is the Song of Solomon, but in Esther's 167 verses, the Persian king is mentioned 190 times, but no explicit reference is made to God.

Several reasons have been suggested about why God's name is absent. Maybe the most obvious, and perhaps the most likely, is that it's intentional. Perhaps its omission teaches the fundamental lesson that when God seems to be absent in human affairs, he may be most present and at work. Because the Jews who read the story of Esther probably were reminded of Joseph. Earlier in their history, Joseph had declared to his brothers, as for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good to bring it about that many people should be kept alive as they are today.

And of course, that's Genesis 50-20. And the book of Esther provides the same assurance. Just think about the situation that the Jews faced. They were different from the people who lived around them, and they knew that their rulers could not be trusted. The Persians held all the power in their hands, and the Jews had none. So even though these Jews had been born in Persia, they were exiled far from their homeland, and they were surrounded by strangers. Their property could be seized at any time, and their life could be ended at any time, and they needed some assurance that God was on their side. A second possible reason for no mention of God's name could be that God's displeasure with his people might have been behind the reason. Deuteronomy 31-18 suggests this possibility. That verse says, And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evil which they have done, and that they have turned to other gods. So if that situation applies here, God was hiding his face from his people on account of their sins. Many had deliberately chosen to remain in the land of exile instead of returning to their original land with Zerubbabel. A third possibility is that God's name may be absent because of the author's fear of Persian censorship. We know that both Peter and John, when they wrote, didn't mention Rome by name in their writings, but they employed substitutes instead.

Although God's name is never mentioned, his overruling providence is the background to all the proceedings in the book, and the book shows that we cannot tell what God may be doing at the time in history that the events happen. The book is remarkable for its number of coincidences, but as we go along, we'll see that these coincidences really were no coincidences at all.

[3 : 12] We're going to cover chapter one tonight, so let's go ahead and read the chapter before we talk more about the background, and then we'll dive into the verses. So in chapter one, we're going to learn about lifestyles of the rich and famous. And let's go ahead and read those, starting with verse one.

It says, Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia under 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, in the third year of his reign, he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him. While he shelled the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. 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. There were white carton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl, and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. And drinking was according to this edict. There is no compulsion, for the king had given orders to all the staff of his

palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to king

Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Miamun, Bistah, Harbona, Bigthah, Avikthah, Zether, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of king Ahasuerus, to bring queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to show the princes and the people her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. But queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him. Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times, for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, the men next to him being Karshina, Shether, Admetha, Tarshish, Meriz, Myrcena, and Mimican, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face and sat first in the kingdom. According to the law, what is to be done to queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of king Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs? Then Mimican said in the presence of the king and the officials, not only against the king has queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of king Ahasuerus.

For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, King Ahasuerus commanded queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come. This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before king Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all the kingdom, for it is vast, all the women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike. This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Mimican proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script, and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household, and speak according to the language of his people. Although the book never says who wrote it, we do know the timing of the book. The year was 485 BC, and Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, who was the father of Artaxerxes from the book of Nehemiah, had just ascended to the throne of the Medo-Persian Empire. He now ruled over many nations from the Indus River, which is modern Pakistan, all the way to upper Sudan, and from the Aral Sea in the northeast to the Ionian Sea in the west. Darius I was Xerxes' father, and he'd attempted to add Greece to his extensive domain, but his army had suffered a crushing defeat at the Battle of Marathon, and he had been forced to retreat. Darius set about building a new army, and he was trying to amass all the materials needed for a fresh assault on

Greece, but before he could accomplish any of his plan, he died and he was succeeded by Xerxes. Following his father's untimely death, Xerxes determined to erase the humiliation of Persia's defeat, and he spent the first three years of his reign consolidating his position on the throne, and then he set about planning his defeat of the Greeks. So to do this, he began by inviting all of the princes, army officers, nobles, and officials from his 127 far-frung provinces to come to Susa, and for six months in about 482 BC, he entertained these dignitaries, and during this time, he tried to impress them with his vast wealth, and he shared with them his plans for adding Greece to his empire. Xerxes' determination to settle the score with Greece shows us something about his character that we'll see over and over at other times during the book of Esther. Like most rulers, Xerxes likes to get his way, and when he fails to get his way, he sets out to do something about it, even if that action is inadvisable.

[9:17] So we're going to break chapter 1 into three sections tonight. The first thing we'll see is the feast. So the feast is the first part of your handout there. Your heading is plural because verses 1 through 9 mention two feasts. One of those feasts is given by the king, and one is given by the queen. So look at verses 1 through 9 again. It says, Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia, over 127 provinces, in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, in the third year of his reign, he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed his riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. 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.

There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with rods, or excuse me, cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king, and drinking was according to this edict. There is no compulsion, for the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. We already have talked about the reason for these festivities. Ahasuerus wanted to impress the dignitaries with his vast wealth. He also wanted to convince them that, unlike his father, he had a good plan for conquering Greece. Susa was the winter residence, and it was one of four capital cities. The citadel refers to the fortified palace complex above the city for protection. Xerxes ruled over the largest empire known up to that time, but he still wanted more, and that also tells us something about his character, too. Verse 3 tells us that the guest list included the army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces. A source outside the Bible recorded that Xerxes' own bodyguard included 2,000 select horsemen, 2,000 lancers, and 10,000 infantry soldiers. So you can see from these verses why the lesson title is Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous.

Notice how extravagant the celebration is. In addition to the celebration and the final feast lasting a total of six months, we see that Artaxerxes sought to impress people with things made from fine linen, marble, silver, mother of pearl, and precious stones. We know from other books that writers of the Old Testament were economical with their words. Their spending so much time on the extravagance here tells us that the writer of Esther clearly displayed a sense of extravagance in the midst of such ornate beauty and false pretense. And really what the writer is trying to get through to us is that true wealth would be discovered in being loyal to God's will rather than this lavish celebration. Usually in feasts like these, the Toastmaster would indicate when everyone was to drink. But this feast was livened by the fact that any guest could drink in his own way. And each guest could drink as much or as little as he desired. In other words, the king was liberal with the wine. And this suggests the luxurious but unrestrained and immoral character of the banquet.

[13:12] It also tells us something else too, because no detail escaped the empire's notice and regulation. You know, when they even make an act about whether you should drink or shouldn't drink or whether you can drink as much as you want or as little as you want, that tells you how much attention they're paying to detail. But when you think about it, power that must regulate conformity at this level inevitably creates a petty bureaucracy. Real power doesn't consist in regulating such minute details. In fact, the tendency to regulate such details is actually a sign of weakness and not power.

Xerxes or Ahasuerus clearly was trying to convince everyone of his power and authority, and we'll soon see whether he was successful at doing that. In verse 9, the phrase, Queen Vashti also gave a feast, indicates that the queen had liberty to make decisions and take actions on her own. Some have thought that because the queen gave a banquet for the women, the men and women were always segregated at banquets. But Persian custom did not require that men and women eat separately.

In fact, according to a historian, Persians usually had their wives with them at the feast. Vashti actually means sweetheart, and it may have been a term of endearment for her.

However, the point of verse 9 is simply that Xerxes and Vashti were acting separately, and their actions foreshadowed their separation to come. So we just discussed how the king liked to display his power and authority, and in the second section of the lesson, we see just how little power and authority he really has.

When the king gets snubbed, we see the fury, and so the fury is the second place of your handout. Yep. We see that in verses 10 through 12. Verses 10 through 12 say, On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Miamun, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, and Avaktha, Zether, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to 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.

[15:26] But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this, the king became very enraged, and his anger burned within him. So the king, the great king

Ahasuerus, had been drinking for seven straight days, and he was predictably in high spirits.

And with the characteristic touch of overkill, he sent no fewer than seven people to summon his queen to himself, and he wanted her to be wearing a royal crown, so that he could impress the people with her beauty.

Over the centuries, the rabbis, as well as modern commentators, have discussed the queen's refusal and the reason for it. The rabbis thought the king actually wanted Vashti to appear naked. They thought when he said, appear wearing your crown, that he meant to wear only your crown. And they may have been going beyond the text when they interpreted the command that way, but they were not too far off the mark in discerning the offensiveness of Ahasuerus' intentions, because to command his wife to appear even dressed up in a royal finery for the enjoyment of a crowd of drunken men was to treat her as a doll or a mere object who existed for the king's pleasure.

So he wanted to show off his power with the trophy wife in contemporary jargon. And so here we see the dark side of placing so much power in the hands of a man whose only thought is of himself.

[16:49] So think about the situation. The raw power of the empire actually encountered a snag. The verse says, But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs, and at this the king became enraged and his anger burned within him.

Of course, that's verse 12. The law of the Maids and Persians, which could not be revoked, could still be resisted. And so that's what Ashley had done here, or Vashti had done here.

The law might be able to compel people to drink as they wished, but it couldn't ultimately compel the king's wife to be treated as an object. So a mere woman stood up and said no, and the empire was powerless to enforce its will.

And the glorious empire was shaken to its foundations because of her refusal. So, so much for the king's power and authority. The author of the book doesn't tell us why Vashti refused.

We do know, though, that to display her beauty would imply becoming unveiled, which would be violating the custom of the time. No doubt the queen also knew what it would be like to show her beauty before that large group of men, many who were probably intoxicated.

[17:57] So Americans may think that Nancy Reagan was the first wife of a ruler to come up with the phrase, just say no, but Vashti actually was the first ruler's wife to do that. You didn't know she copied that from the Bible, did you?

So that brings us to the third and final section of the chapter. We've seen the feast and we've seen the fury. In verses 13 through 22, we see the futility.

So the futility is what we'll talk about in these verses. And specifically, we see the futility of what the king tries to do in response to Vashti's refusal. Listen to 13 through 22 again.

It says, Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times, for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, the men next to him being Karshina, Shether, Admatha, Tarshish, Maris, Myrsina, and Mimican, the seven princes of Persia and Media who saw the king's face and sat first in the kingdom.

According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs? Then Mimican said in the presence of the king and officials, Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

[19:20] For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.

This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.

So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike. This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Mimican proposed.

He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script, and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household, and speak according to the language of his people.

So the king and his seven advisors busily set about making another law that they were powerless to enforce. So let's start from the bottom up and talk about why the king would be powerless to enforce this new law.

[20 : 42] Verse 22 tells us that he, the king, sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in his own script, and to every people in his own language, that every man be master in his own household, and speak according to the language of his people.

So consider the futility of this regulation. The entire weight of imperial authority was placed behind the edict, and it was a royal decree, a law that can never be repealed.

And the entire resources of the empire went into spreading this edict all throughout the royal mails, and the intricate system of horses and dispatch riders, which carried the emperor's wishes speedily to the most distant provinces.

So you can see that even before Twitter, rulers had a way of getting their edicts out to the people. Ahasuerus knew how to do that, just by using the mail system. But a series of questions will help us see why the king's actions were so futile.

So what was actually achieved by all of this huffing and puffing? Do you really think the social order of Persia was threatened by one woman's resistance? And even if it were, can such a principle of male authority in the household really be imposed by a governmental decree?

[21 : 59] You can also think about whether all men are to exercise power in such a self-centered way as Ahasuerus did, and then if they do, should they expect instant obedience?

And so is every man supposed to banish his wife if she fails to submit to his will? So you can see just by thinking through this, that this decree is impossible to enforce.

And the king's advisors, who still must have been under the influence of the wine, obviously thought that the government could legislate such obedience. After lobbying for Vashti to be removed from the throne, Mimikin says this in verse 20.

He says, When the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike. So do you see a flaw with his logic there?

The edict actually deconstructs itself because it merely publicizes all throughout the vast empire, and in the language of every people group, the reality of Ahasuerus' lack of authority in his own household.

[23 : 06] The reality is that without the edict, most of the empire would never have heard about this incident. But Ahasuerus has proclaimed it himself through this edict, so the effect that it had was exactly the opposite of what the king intended.

If Ahasuerus was afraid that the story of the rejection would spread through gossip, his own edict has validated it, and everybody is going to hear the story now. So once again, at the same time that we're impressed by his power, we find it hard not to laugh at him because he actually tried to slam a sledgehammer down on a bug, and he missed.

Ahasuerus, though, will still be able to enforce the part of the edict that says Vashti can never again come before the king, but even that part of the decree puts the king in a bad light because his decree concerning Vashti is symptomatic of a more general weakness in his character.

At the same time, he's being surrounded and manipulated by advisors who likewise wield their power with more enthusiasm than skill. So this is the world that God's people found themselves in at that time, and it seems like we still find ourselves in a world like that today because we often see that the reins of power are in the hands of the incompetent, and at best, the nations are guarded by people who are immoral, or at least lacking morals at best.

So many Christians throughout the world live in countries that are practical dictatorships, or where the real power seems to lie in the hands of the local mafia or a drug cartel, not in the elected government officials.

[24 : 42] So the world is still a dangerous place where power and wisdom are frequently unconnected. So the reality of living with such people holding the power of life and death may seem to be no laughing matter, but sometimes laughter is the best way to respond to situations like that.

So what can we learn from the opening chapter of Esther for our own walk in the world? First, Esther reminds us not to take the power and glory of this world too seriously.

Sometimes we do just have to laugh at what's going on. The world takes itself all too seriously, and the world wants us to take it seriously too. If you think about it, we live in a society that elevates the

trivial.

We live in a world that considers the car we drive as an extension of who we are, and is more impressed by where someone went to school than by whether the person learned anything while he was at that school.

The empire of materialism in which we live desperately takes stuff too seriously too. It wants us to study the world's laws and learn how to get ahead by the world's standards.

[25 : 52] It wants us to dream of having six-month-long banquets in beautifully decorated gardens and palaces, and then to devote our lives to pursuing that dream. So it's easy for us to be dazzled by the show, but when you get right down to it, the show is empty of real power.

And to defend ourselves against the danger of being assimilated, sometimes we have to learn to laugh at the empire. We must learn to feel compassion for those around us whose lives are wasted in pursuit of worthless goals like this, but we also should laugh at ourselves when we see our own hearts getting weighed down on the world scale of values.

True value lies in the values of an altogether different empire, and that's the message that we can bring to the world. But we can relate then to the two primary temptations that the Jews faced in Esther's day because on the one hand, the power of the pagan empire was intensely visible and tangible.

They heard it every day in the footsteps of the marching soldiers, and they saw the rumbling chariot wheels and heard those as well. They saw the opulent wealth and the absolute control over the details of life, and they smelled the power and the incense offered in state-sponsored pagan temples.

So it would be easy for them to say, why not give up and just realize that we should be assimilated into this society? It would be much easier for us.

[27 : 20] What made the temptation to assimilate particularly pressing was the fact that most of the really enthusiastic, God-fearing people had returned to Jerusalem already by this time with Zerubbabel.

Vashti's refusal nonetheless serves to reveal the weakness of the law to command behavior, though, because Vashti showed everybody that resistance is possible. Assimilation to the will of the empire is not inevitable.

But assimilation was just one of the two temptations facing the Jews at that time. Even if they didn't want to be assimilated, despair could set in for them. The Jews were surrounded by a fickle, all-powerful empire that might well turn out to be antagonistic to them, and they followed a God whose ways were often obscure, invisible, and mysterious.

So even though they may have secretly cheered Queen Vashti's resistance, the Jews saw Vashti suffer consequences of her refusal. We already have talked about how the book satirizes the empire, mocking its claims to power and authority.

Satire takes the object of fear, the authority, and makes fun of it, showing us the ridiculous side of the story. So this book really is to make us laugh because the book of Esther shows us that the great empire is not run by fearsome giants after all, but by petty bureaucrats.

[28 : 40] One commentator referred to the king and his seven advisors as the king and his seven dwarfs, and we see that they do sort of have that effect as we go through the chapter. Second, the book shows us that God is often at work in this world in an entirely different mode than he was, say, in the events of the Exodus.

In the Exodus, God's work is all thunder and lightning. He's full of dramatic interventions that expose the emptiness of the Egyptian gods. So we have great heroes there like Moses and Aaron to lead the people and a trail of miracles to attest to God's presence with them.

In Esther, however, we see God working invisibly and behind the scenes. There are neither dramatic miracles nor great heroes, just apparently ordinary province moving flawed and otherwise undistinguishable people right into the right place at the right time to bring the empire into line with what God wants to accomplish for his people.

Although God is never mentioned by name anywhere in the book, when it comes to a conflict between the empire of Ahasuerus and the seven dwarfs on one side and the kingdom of the almighty invisible God on the other, we know that there's only one possible outcome.

None of the events in chapter one would have seemed significant to the Jewish community in Susa at the time. Few, if any, Jews would have been invited to the party and nobody would have predicted that changing the queen would have such a dramatic impact on the Jews.

[30 : 10] Only with the benefit of hindsight is it possible to see all the intricate details of God's plan working together for the good of his people. And that's that way in our lives too.

We may well have no idea what God is doing at times. He may sometimes see hidden and remote to us refusing to answer our prayers and refusing to give us what we so earnestly ask of him. But we need to remember that the end of our story has yet to be told. Only God knows how the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle will fit together. So even the things that seem to have no logical connection with one another may come together for our benefit when we have the benefit of hindsight as well.

So the real message is even though we cannot see God acting all the time we should never assume that God is doing nothing. God's work is sometimes quiet faithfulness to his promises in seemingly ordinary providences of life and he brings that about in the hearts of his people and he does that to accomplish what he has purposed.

The third thing we can learn from this passage is that God's kingdom is unlike the empire of Ahasuerus. The book of Esther repeatedly invites us to compare and contrast the kingdom of God and the empire of Ahasuerus and there are some superficial similarities between the two kingdoms but in each case they hide deeper differences.

[31 : 34] The Lord too is a great king and his decrees cannot be challenged or repealed but his sovereignty governs all things great and small and he must be obeyed or we will certainly suffer the consequences but his law is beneficial for men and women unlike the drunken meanderings of a man at the mercy of his fruit counselors.

God never uses people for his own purposes as if they were disposable commodities. Rather, he generously invites them into a loving relationship with himself.

His kingdom grows and does its work not through the outwardly powerful and attractive but rather in hidden but effective ways. For that reason, Jesus compares the kingdom of God to the growth of a mustard seed or to the work of leaven.

It starts small and hidden but it achieves its goals nonetheless. The Lord too has prepared a substanceless banquet for his people on the last day but when God summons his bride, the church, to his banquet, he does so to lavish his grace and mercy upon her.

He doesn't do it to make us an object for other people to see. So we can see why Queen Vashti was reluctant to appear before Ahasuerus but who would refuse such a wonderful invitation from God to experience life in all of its fullness.

[32 : 56] So far from regarding his people as objects solely to feed his pride and pleasure, Jesus took those who were by nature completely unattractive and gave himself for them laying down his own life for his people because we know it was while we were still dead in our transgressions and sins that Christ gave himself for us.

His life became a ransom for the ungodly. Everything we have even the very righteousness in which we are clothed to appear before God comes from his own hand. As we go through the book we'll see that the Jews of Esther's day were reminded that what others meant for evil God meant for good and we'll get the same reminder that reminder and the reminder of what God has done for us through Christ should give us confidence as we face uncertain times in our world today.

The God of Joseph and the God of Esther is still the same God that we serve and in an ever changing world as the writer of Hebrews put it in Hebrews 13.8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday today and forever.

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