

Partying And Providence

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[0 : 0 0] As I said, today we are starting a new series on the book of Esther, and so we're going to look together at chapter 1, and I'll read again verses 10 to 12. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abaktha, Zeta, 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.

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.

We're going to look at this book together for the next seven Sundays, and if you have the chance, please read through the whole of Esther later on today or later on this week. And as you read through that book, you are going to find jealousy, hatred, racism, drinking, sex, political plots, power games, beautiful woman, and no mention of God at all.

And the minute we say those things, we realize that we should smile when people say that the Bible is out of touch with life today.

Our series is going to be called The Good, The Bad, The Ugly, and The Beautiful. And the reason I chose that title is because Esther is actually a very messy book.

[1 : 3 9] You're going to see some good things and some bad things. You'll see stuff that's very ugly, and you'll see some things that are very beautiful.

And this is one of the many reasons why Esther is such a helpful book for us to look at, because in so many ways, life is messy. And even life as Christians, that's true for us as well.

So often life is a complicated and tangled web of good stuff and bad stuff, of wise choices and terrible mistakes, of things going well, of things going badly, of people doing beautiful things, and of people doing awful things.

That's true of us. It's true of Esther. It's true of every generation in human history. Life is so often very, very messy. And within that mess, what we find in Esther is a conflict.

And that conflict is between the kingdom and purposes of God and the dominion and influence of evil. That's the framework within which the book of Esther sits.

[2 : 4 5] It's actually the framework within which the whole Bible sits and the whole of human history sits. Esther is part of that. Our lives are part of that.

All of our lives are tangled up in a mess where these two forces, the forces between God's purposes and the power and influence of evil, these collide. Eventually, that mess will unravel.

One day Jesus will return. And all that mess that we experience in life just now will unravel. And we will find ourselves on one side or the other.

That's what happens in Esther. In the mess of life, good and evil collide bit by bit as we go through Esther.

It unravels. And the consequences for the people in this book are massive. So we're going to be looking at all of that together over the next few weeks.

[3 : 54] As we start, there's two important points I want to just notice. The first is that the mess of life that we see in Esther is actually all played out at the very top of society.

So this book is set in the world of the rich, the powerful, the successful, the beautiful. It's all mega glamorous. It's all a mess.

And that's a really powerful reminder that you don't need to be poor to be messy. In fact, very often, it's the case that the more power and success and beauty and reputation and glory that we have in life, the messier it can get.

So all of this is at the top of society, but it's messy. The second key point that we're going to see as we go through it is that in the mess of this book, Mordecai and Esther, who are the two prominent characters, are not mentioned in this chapter, but they will be in the next chapter.

Mordecai and Esther, the two kind of key characters, in many ways they're the heroes of the book, but they're not squeaky clean.

[4 : 59] And one of the books I read this week about Esther described them as questionable heroes. And we're going to see in later chapters that that is actually true.

And that's really important for us to recognize, because as we go through this book, we're going to see several key characters. But we are not saying that Esther is a kind of goodies and baddies story.

And as we read through it, you need to be like the goodies, Esther and Mordecai, and not like the baddies, Haman and Asuerus and others who are involved in this story. This is not a goodies and baddies story, and it's not saying, be like the goodies, don't be like the baddies.

This book is telling you that life is a mess. It's a tangled web of good and evil, of truth and lies, of trusting God, or being lured away by idols.

And ultimately, that mess will unravel, and ultimately you and I will go in one direction or the other. So the book of Esther is going to meet us in all the messiness of life, in the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful.

[6 : 10] And it's going to teach us that nothing is more important, and nothing is more urgent, and nothing is more serious. That as we face the reality of the mess of life, we need to set our trust on Jesus and follow him as our saviour and king.

Today, our title is Partying and Providence, and we're just going to unpack each half of that title as we go through the rest of our sermon together.

So first of all, thinking about partying. Chapter 1 introduces us to the king of Persia, Ahasuerus. He's also known as Xerxes. You'll see that in some translations.

He reigned from 486 to 465 BC. So that's very much at the tail end of the Old Testament. So when you think about the Old Testament, if you go back to Abraham, you're pretty much at about 2000 BC.

And the Old Testament is running through to about 400 BC. And sorry, my pen's not working very well today. Then you've got a gap called the Intertestamental Period, and the New Testament starts about 4 BC or a little bit before that, but more or less then.

[7 : 24] So Esther's about here. Very, very near the end of the Old Testament. Judah has been conquered by Babylon, and the people were taken into exile.

Babylon was then conquered by the Persians, who were in control at the time of Esther. And during that period, some Jews returned to Jerusalem, but some remained in Persia.

And Esther is talking to us about some of those who had remained. The king hosts a massive party. You see in verses 3 to 5, it's described as a feast.

And this is one of several feasts that we have in the book of Esther. This one lasted six months. So it's just a kind of massive, lavish, non-stop holiday party display of lavish power, wealth.

And many people were invited from all over the kingdom. And then at the end of it, we see that the king gave a smaller feast for the residents of Susa, probably to celebrate the fact that all the tourists were going home at long last.

[8 : 29] And it's all very beautiful and spectacular. You can see in verses 6 and 7, you've got the descriptions of the curtains and the cords and the pillars and the couches and the jewelry, the vessels, everything.

It's all super fancy. And at the same time, Queen Vashti gave a feast for all the women in the palace as well. So all of it looks great. The rich and the powerful and the beautiful are all having a great party.

The truth is, it's a mess. So you see, as you look at it, that the drinking is out of control.

You've got this interesting phrase in verse 8 regarding the drinking, there is no compulsion. Now, what does that mean? Some people have, there's different ways of interpreting that phrase, because some people have interpreted that to say, well, you know, there's no compulsion, so no one's forced to drink what they don't want to drink, as though, you know, they were being a wee bit careful.

Others have taken it to mean no compulsion, as the idea of no regulations, that no one is stopped from drinking as much as they liked. And I think that's what it means, because the context around it, if you see the language before in verse 7, it talks about drink being lavished on people.

[9 : 42] And at the end of verse 8, it talks about people getting as much as they want. And at the end of verse 10, when it talks of the heart of the king being merry with wine, that's a very polite way of saying that he was hammered.

The drinking was out of control. You also see beautiful women being treated very badly. And so the drunken king sends for his beautiful wife Vashti, and his goal is so that everyone will just stare at her.

Bring her in, let's look at her, because she's nice to look at. And as we'll see next week, and go through the rest of the book, that the king just seems to be of the view that, you know, what matters in a woman is how good she looks, he's rich, he's powerful, he should be able to click his fingers, and he gets a good-looking woman to do whatever he wants her to do.

And part of that is, part of the reason for that is that in this party, and what we see in chapter one, maybe the biggest aspect of the mess is that you see a very weak leader.

And so, Hasuerus is the king of this massive empire, but he is a very, very weak leader. And so, he wants Vashti to come in, she says no, and he responds in two ways.

[11 : 06] First of all, he's raging, furious, that she's not obeying his command. But then secondly, in verses 13 to 15, he turns to those around him and says, what should I do?

Tell me what to do. And both of these display very weak leadership. When things don't go his way, he loses the plot. But in order to address the situation, he's looking to the people around him, saying, tell me what I'm supposed to do.

And again and again, you're going to see throughout Esther that this king, who supposedly rules half of the world, is hopeless at making decisions, hopeless at showing leadership, and constantly needs people around him to tell him what to do.

The outcome of it all is that his royal advisors tell him, you need to issue a decree saying that all women must obey their husbands, must honor their husband, all men must be masters of their own household.

And the writer of Esther is being deliberately ironic, even humorous, because here you have the king who supposedly rules 127 provinces, and he can't even get his wife to obey him.

[12 : 14] And this drunken ruler who failed to gain the respect of one woman, of his wife, tries to make it law that every woman should respect every man who is their husband.

It's all pathetic. It's all actually laughable. It's a great example of weak leadership. It's an example of the fact that whenever you try to impose your authority, you will lose it.

So, the lavish party is actually a mess. And in all of these ways, what we see is humanity taking something beautiful and making it ugly.

They're taking something beautiful and they're making it ugly. So, a feast is not a bad thing. A feast is not a bad thing at all. It's actually a beautiful thing. And never, ever, never, ever think that the Bible is against a party or a feast or a celebration.

It is absolutely not. In fact, at the very end of Esther, you'll see that a key part of the book is to establish a feast, a party in the life of the Jews where every year they are to celebrate.

[13 : 18] And occasions when we get together, enjoy great food, enjoy good wine, delight in each other's company, that's 100% endorsed by the Bible. It's a beautiful thing to do. But so often, we make it ugly.

We make it ugly by drinking too much, by losing self-control, by ending up getting angry and in confrontation and in our rage. We make it ugly by going completely over the top.

And you know it's true. So often, so often you'll see people, they'll leave their house on a Saturday evening looking their best and they'll come home a few hours later looking a complete mess. All because they've gone too far.

It's the same with the beauty of women. Every culture in human history has recognized that women are beautiful. And some women are incredibly beautiful. Some men are very handsome.

Not this one, but some others. And beauty is definitely recognized today. But it is so quickly made into something ugly. Where women especially are kind of objectified, degraded, and just put on display like objects.

[14 : 28] You've got the whole world of pornography that just reduces women mostly to be the providers of just a kind of a cheap and shallow thrill. people. And worst of all, today, and we've seen this loads of times in recent years, you've got rich and powerful men expecting women to just do whatever they want them to do regardless of whether or not they've consented or not.

Simply because they're powerful. Something beautiful has been made into something very, very ugly. It's the same in regard to leadership. Whether that's in nations or in families, leadership provides the opportunity for humanity to be at its best, for humanity to display beautiful acts of protection and provision and guidance and kindness.

Leadership gives us the opportunity to do that. And yet so often that is turned ugly because people take power and abuse it. And the weak are exploited, leaders become corrupt, people will do anything to stay in power, and leadership instead of being beautiful becomes ugly.

we meet all of this in Esther and we meet all of it in 2025. And as we recognize it all, we need to compare all of this with the way things should be.

We need to compare it with Jesus. And whenever you look at a leader in the Bible or whenever you encounter a leader in your life, always compare that leader with Jesus.

[16 : 00] So in Ahasuerus, you find a king who says, I'm going to use my resources to look good. I'm going to invite everybody from all over my provinces to come and see how amazing I am.

I'm going to use my resources to look good. In Jesus, you find a king who says, I am going to use my resources to do good. In Ahasuerus, you find a king who says, I want to look wise, so tell me what I should say and do.

In Jesus, you have a king who says, I am wise, and so you're not going to tell me what I should or shouldn't do. I will teach you.

And in Ahasuerus, you find a king who says, I think you look beautiful. I'd love to stare at you. In Jesus, you find a king who says, I think you are beautiful.

I will die for you. And the key question is, who do you want to be ruled by? And that is actually such a relevant question because in Ahasuerus and in Esther 1, you can see all the dynamics of social media, peer pressure, showbiz glitz, terrible bosses at work, shallow friends, cheap thrills, and people living for the moment.

[17 : 22] All the stuff that we see around us just now, we see it here, and we can be led by it. We can be ruled by it. In Jesus, you will find somebody magnificently different.

In Jesus, you find someone magnificently different. Our second heading is providence.

As we mentioned at the start, one of the famous and quite striking things about Esther is that there's no mention of God in the whole book at all.

And that surprised people. It's actually led some people to kind of question, well, should this book be in the Bible? Some people actually tried to kind of add extra bits to it to kind of include a bit that mentioned God to think, oh, we'll kind of fix this.

And it's definitely meant that lots and lots of people have neglected it. It's not a book that we tend to go to that often. And it's definitely unusual for a book of the Bible not to mention God.

[18 : 28] But crucial point is this. This is not a mistake. It's actually very, very deliberate. And we need to recognize that from the very start.

One of the key things that Esther is teaching us is that in the midst of all the mess of the Persian ruling class, God was at work.

And there was never a moment when he wasn't in control. And this is what we mean when we talk about providence, when we talk about God's wise and loving involvement and governance over the whole world.

And that's a really important Christian doctrine. The doctrine of providence is actually a doctrine that goes hand in hand with the doctrine of creation. So when we talk about creation, we should really always talk about creation and providence because the two go together.

A lot of people will just have a kind of view of creation. So they will think, yes, God created the world, but he kind of just left it to get on with itself. And so you have this idea of a creator God, but he's remote and distant and the world is just kind of doing its own thing and God's just way over there somewhere.

[19 : 36] Lots of people have that kind of view of the world. And other people will have a view of the world where it's maybe a kind of providence, but no creator, where you think, well, yes, there is a kind of force that's controlling the world, but it's not a loving, wise, personal God.

It's actually a force like fate or the deterministic mechanisms of our biology or whatever it may be. And so some people will have this, well, yes, there's a creator, but we don't know him. And other people have said, well, we're all being controlled, but we'll be controlled by mechanics and forces and fate or whatever.

The Christian teaching is so beautifully different because in the gospel, in the Bible's worldview, you have creation and providence hand in hand. The God who made us is actively involved in the lives of all of his creatures and all of their actions.

God upholds the world, governs it, keeps everything moving and working. And all of that's in the working of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness and mercy.

And this is actually a great example of where the biblical doctrine will be confirmed by your textbooks of biology, chemistry and physics because the deeper you go into all of these disciplines, the more you will find the incredible balance that exists in the whole of reality around us.

[20 : 58] And all of that's pointing us to the providential working of God. So, providence. God is in control always active, always involved. And you see this in Esther because there's no mention of God, there's no prayers, there's no prophets, there's no miracles.

But what you do see is very, very remarkable coincidences, if we put them in inverted commas. And so as we read through Esther, you're going to see Esther get an opportunity that she never expected.

You're going to see Mordecai just overhearing a conversation because he was in the right place at the right time. And then at a pivotal moment in the story, everything changes because the king can't sleep.

And even in this chapter, Vashti, she takes a stand that leads to her fall. So her courage in saying no to her abusive husband came at the cost of her being removed as king, although I sometimes wonder whether Vashti was delighted and relieved that she was able to get away from him.

Either way, Vashti's decision in chapter one opens a door to create the situation that takes Esther from being an orphaned nobody to becoming the queen of Persia.

[22 : 06] It's all the outworking of God's plan. And one of the big lessons we learn from Esther is that God's redemptive purposes are fulfilled through providence.

God, his purposes are fulfilled through providence. And that is so important to remember because, yes, the Bible does record many miracles and many remarkable events and many spectacular moments.

But it also records many, many, many very ordinary events. And yet, these very ordinary events are working together to accomplish God's purposes.

And the doctrine of providence is telling us that even if you don't see the spectacular in your life, there is never a moment when God is not involved in your life.

and there is never an area of our lives where he does not have total authority. And there is never an event or an experience that you will have that has no purpose or meaning.

[23 : 13] All the time, God is working out his purposes. And the question we need to ask is not, is it happening? The question we need to ask is, are we noticing? And Esther is maybe especially relevant for us today because it's telling the story of Jews living in an unbelieving society.

So this is maybe, this book is maybe the most secular setting of any of the narratives that we have in the Bible. Esther and Mordecai, they live in a city that is totally unbelieving.

And it's telling us that providence and God's purposes still work in an unbelieving world. So, three crucial things I want to highlight as we draw this to a close.

Three lessons I want you to remember. Number one, all of this means that God is present even when he seems absent. God is present even when he seems absent.

Never, ever forget that. If you're going to work, if you're at home on your own, in whatever you're doing this week, it might feel as though God is a million miles away.

[24 : 23] He is not. He is with you. He is there. You can speak to him. God is present even when it feels like he's absent.

We need to remember that in every single part of our lives, but we definitely need to remember that in terms of our evangelism. Providence is really the secret weapon for us finding confidence in our evangelism because it's reminding us that God can work in so many wonderful little ways.

Esther chapter 1 is setting the scene that God is going to work in. And it's telling us that God works in an unbelieving, materialistic, pleasure-seeking mess of a society.

That's the scene that God does amazing things in. And that should give us confidence and encouragement as we try to share the gospel this week. In God's providence this week, you might have just the right conversation with somebody.

You might just send the message that somebody really needed. You might give the invitation to church that your friend is longing for. It's amazing how God can work through so many little insignificant things.

[25 : 27] I've told you this story before but I know some of you won't have heard it. It's one of my favorite stories. A friend of mine in Edinburgh was giving his testimony and he was talking about the fact that he'd grown up going to church as a child but he'd stopped growing as an adult.

He'd married a girl who didn't go to church and so they'd been really successful in their career. Everything was going great but there was no word of church in their lives at all and it was eating away at his conscience and especially because of his father.

His father had brought him up going to church and he was like, I should go to church but he was just aware that he wasn't. but in so many ways he'd just gone way down a different path.

He'd married a girl who didn't go to church and they'd been really successful in their career but he couldn't shake this off. This was gnawing away at him and he said, one day I said to my wife, I said, I think my dad would like it if I went to church.

And he was thinking, what is she going to say? And she said, I don't mind if we go to church. And with tears in his eyes and his wife was sitting in the church while he said this and she was in tears as well, he said that moment changed our lives.

[26 : 46] Because they went, they heard the gospel. And now he's standing for the ministry. Oh, God is so cool. It's so amazing. He just works through these beautiful little things. It's an amazing reminder that God is at work and he can do wonderful things.

And it's just a great reminder that we don't need to panic. Mordecai, the Jews, they seemed powerless in the face of the great Persian empire at this time and yet God was able to work.

And we might feel powerless in the world today around us but God's kingdom is advancing. Jesus is building his church. God's purposes will not be thwarted. The resurrection will never, ever, ever, ever, ever be undone.

And we can take so much confidence in that. God is present even when he seems absent. We can keep going trusting in him.

Number two, all of this means that God has authority even if everyone around us thinks that he's irrelevant. And that again is so important because all of this week you're going to be surrounded by people for whom God is an irrelevance.

[27 : 53] And so in the decisions that they make, the dreams that they pursue, the values that they hold, the priorities that they set are going to have no relation to God at all or pretty much no relation to God in the world that we live in today.

That's how the people in Susa lived. That's how the people around us live today. And it's so easy for us to be just like them. It's so easy for us to think that following God is weird and that we should just embrace all the priorities of the world around us.

We've got to resist that temptation. We've got to remember that God is always always always in charge and we want to obey him and we want to listen to him.

God has authority even when he seems irrelevant. And the third thing we've got to remember and this is maybe the most important thing of all is that God brings meaning even when life seems like a mess.

There is a lot of mess in the book of Esther and there is a lot of mess in the Bible and there is a lot of mess in our lives. And the crucial question is is that mess pointless?

[29 : 06] The things that happened to you this year, the struggles you face, the disappointments you experience, the bruises you get, is that just pointless? Do you just have to suck it up? Is it all a meaningless mess?

is the mess of our lives pointless or is that mess pointing? Is it pointing to the fact that the world is a mess because it's been broken by sin?

Is it pointing you to the fact that we desperately need to be rescued and is it pointing you to the amazing fact that Jesus has come to do exactly that? The brokenness of the world that we live in is all pointing us to the fact that we were made for something so much better.

In fact, the only reason that you know that mess is mess is because you were made for more than mess. The brokenness of the world around us is telling us that something is wrong and Jesus has come to say I've come to put it right.

I've come to rescue you from that mess. He's calling us to follow him and in him we'll find the truth and the joy and the peace that we desperately long for and that the people around us desperately long for as well.

[30 : 32] So in Esther 1 we see partying and providence and I want to just close by saying that if you maybe not get a Christian or you're not quite sure where you are in terms of your faith if you're not sure if you can take that next step to think I'm going to trust Jesus I'm going to follow him as you go into this week and as you go into this year you've got to recognize the fact that the party is going to be pulling you now when I say party I don't just mean weekends that will be part of it weekends pull us in lots of ways and pull us in directions that can go too far in a direction that we shouldn't go but even just the party of success of possessions of impressing people the party of your social media profile or whatever it may be the party of being accepted by your friends that party is going to be pulling you pulling you pulling you all the time pulling you away from

God pulling you to think I'll think about Jesus later in my life and I just I'll just take my mind off it with the party whatever that party may be the party is pulling you but maybe maybe maybe all the time providence is prodding you maybe you just can't shake off the fact that you know you need Jesus and you're hearing things and experiencing things and thinking things that mean that you can't forget him and that you know you need him and if providence is prodding you it's because Jesus wants you and because he loves you and he's saying to you again today come away from the mess and follow me let's pray take