

A Feast for Power

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[0 : 00] So the story of Esther begins with a feast. It begins with a feast for power, a feast that celebrated the power and of the Persian Empire.

The story of Esther also ends with a feast, a feast that celebrates God's deliverance of his people from genocide. And then in between these two feasts, we see quite a lot of other feasts.

The feasts seem to come up quite a lot in the story of Esther. And so over the next five weeks, what we're going to do is we're going to dive into this book in five episodes. And each episode we're going to see is centered around a feast, which pushes the story further and reveals something about what it means to be God's people in the world.

And so we begin with a feast for power. The book of Esther begins with all the power of an empire on display. And with God seemingly absent, one of the most interesting things about Esther is that God isn't actually mentioned in the book by name.

And so that's why our series is called, Is God Still There? That's the question that this book is forcing us to confront. When we look at the state of the world, when we look at the state of our country, and even when we look at the state of the church, we might reasonably ask that same question.

[1 : 31] Is God still there? It's a question that as we work through the story of Esther, a story that is by turns dark, thrilling, challenging, and ultimately comforting, we are going to see answered.

So our story begins in Persia, at the height of the Persian Empire's power. King Xerxes gives this feast celebrating his power.

What the writer of Esther wants us to see is the power of the world. So how does the writer show us the power of the Persian Empire? Well, first he shows us its size when he says in verse 1 that King Xerxes is the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Kush.

So this is an empire at the height of its power, and its reach is pretty staggering. He shows us also its military might. Verse 2 says, At that time, King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials.

The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes and the nobles of the provinces were present. So this is a military nation. And according to other historical sources, Xerxes, along with all of these military leaders, would shortly go to war with Greece.

[2 : 56] But our writer also shows us the power of Persia by showing us its opulence and its decadence. We're told that the king displayed the valent and the splendor and glory of his majesty for 180 days.

And then at the end of those days, he holds his week-long feast. So as today, so in the ancient world, money and power often go hand in hand of an empire.

And the citadel really is a temple to Persia's power. We've got pillars made of marble, couches made of gold, floors made of pearl, and curtains of purple and blue, which were pretty costly dyes in the ancient world.

And this isn't just a picture of Persia's staggering wealth, although it is certainly that. For a Jewish reader, and the Jews would have been the first readership of Esther, these descriptions of the palace would have reminded them of the temple in Jerusalem.

There's a lot of parallels there. And at this stage in Israel's history, there is no temple. The Babylonian empire had the stralis that mimics it.

[4 : 10] What our writer's doing is he's showing us that this is an empire that is attempting to replace and even usurp God him off. The way in which Xerxes wants to display the glory of his majesty is part of the same idea.

Glory often refers to God. But in this story, we can only see the glory of Xerxes. And so this is a theme which runs really right the way through the Bible story.

The world that has turned against God is constantly seeking to supplant him. And instead of recognizing his glorified itself and replace God.

The city of man is constantly attempting to replace the city of God. What the Bible story also repeatedly shows us is that whilst the world may look powerful, it is in fact weak and fragile.

Look at Xerxes. He's literally the most powerful man in the world. And yet he's fairly comprehensively humiliated by his wife.

[5 : 17] He probably deserves the humiliation though, to be fair. Displaying his wealth and his power wasn't enough for him. He wants to display Queen Vashti for his drunken lecherous generals as well.

And she, quite recently we might add, declines. The result is that the king, we're told in verse 12, became furious and burned with anger.

Other historical sources tell us that King Xerxes once had the heads of a group of soldiers lopped off because a storm destroyed a bridge that they were supposed to seize.

It had a raging temper that you really didn't want to cross. So what the king does, he consults his courtiers, who are clearly a group of sycophants. He asks them what to do, and they tell the king that what Queen Vashti has done is an affront against all men in Persia because, as they say in verse 18, this very day, the Persian and median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way.

There will be no end of dispect and discord, according to them. Today, this reaction might be called fragile masculinity. Their ingenious solution is to have the crown stripped from Vashti and given to another woman and to publish Vashti's punishment all across the empire in order to restore respect for the man of the house.

[6 : 47] If they were worried about women in Persia finding out about Vashti's conduct, the irony is that this edict makes sure that everyone finds out. So our writer really is laughing at Xerxes and his crew of sycophants.

They may have power, but they're also morons. Persia may be the most powerful empire in the world, but at its core is weakness and fragility.

Does this ring any bells with the world that we know? I think that what the writer of Esther shows us is really a picture of the world in every generation. The most powerful players on the world stage often look imposing and unassailable.

They have wealth, they have influence, they have military might. And whether or not they know they're doing it, they try to usurp God himself. And yet, at their core is fragility and weakness.

We could think of powerful leaders like Vladimir Putin in Russia or Xi Jinping in China. These are at the head of powerful, repressive regimes.

- [7 : 59] They look unassailable. And those who don't follow their lead will pay the price. China's dictatorial behavior in Hong Kong is a fairly clear and recent example of that.
- And no other country is going to step in out of fear. Like Persia, China is a fairly monolithic power and certainly not the safest place to be a Christian. In a more or less functioning democracy like ours, I suspect power looks a little different.
- A lot of power resides in the corporations, in the banks, in those with capital, the rich and the wealthy who dictate culture and policy. And many people are left without a real voice.
- Immigrants, asylum seekers, the homeless, those trapped in poverty, and those trapped in cycles of abuse. Those different groups that Jonathan's just been praying for and many others besides.
- And the power to silence is certainly growing. Although we're extremely fortunate that a lot of Christian ethics still inform the ethics of our culture, the shape of things is changing.
- [9 : 03] There are, for example, certain opinions that can no longer be said for fear of rejection or being ostracized. One never wants to sound alarmist by suggesting that the thought police are coming.
- But proposed legislation like the hate crime bill is certainly a way of enshrining that kind of power to silence. What's comforting is that in all these cases of power, there will be a fragility and a weakness at their core.
- I'm sure God's people living in Persia under Xerxes didn't see it. But history always reduces empires and power to dust and memory. That's the idea behind the poem Ozymandias by Shelley.
- The poem tells of a ruined statue, two legs standing on a pedestal in the desert. And the pedestal's got these words carved into it, my name is Ozymandias, king of kings, look on my works, he mighty and despair.
- And then the poem ends. Nothing Beside Remains, round the decay of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare, the lone and level sands stretch far away.
- [10 : 18] It's a picture of an empire long since gone and drowned by the sands of time. The head of Ozymandias lies shattered in the desert. He has no power now.
- But, and it's a fairly big but, what use is that to the people on the ground? We might all be able to agree that power comes and power goes.
- We might even all agree that power is at its core weak and fragile. But that doesn't help those in the present suffering under the iron boot of that power.
- And it's this observation that leads to us of God's people. The world looks powerful. And both now and in the story of Esther, God's people look weak.
- In chapter 2, we're introduced to our two main characters, Mordecai and his adoptive daughter Esther. And we learn that they're part of God's people, the Jews.
- [11 : 18] And through them, what we learn is that God's people have become a people without a home and a people without an identity. We're told that Mordecai's great grandfather Kish had been taken into exile in Babylon probably over a hundred years before.
- Since then, the Babylonian empire has been routed and ruined by the Persians. Some of the exiles had returned to Judah and Jerusalem, but many of them had lives and made families in the Persian empire, and so they stayed.
- A hundred years is, after all, quite a long time. Think about a hundred years ago from now, the ink on the Treaty of Versailles, which ended World War I, was barely dry, and the Russian Civil War and the Irish War of Independence were still raging on.

How far we've come in a hundred years. And so the destruction of Jerusalem must have felt like an age ago for God's people living in Persia. The problem was, so much of the identity of God's people was wrapped up with Jerusalem, wrapped up with the Promised Land of Israel, and the temple where God's presence dwelt.

In the Persian empire, God's people were losing their identity. They were unrooted, if you like. If you've seen the U.S. office, you'll know the character of Jim likes to prank the fairly uptight Dwight.

[12 : 42] One of his pranks is to dress up as Dwight, he's got a fairly distinctive look about him, and pretend to be him, to which Dwight rather earnestly responds, identity fraud is not a joke, Jim.

Billions of families suffer every year. His response is way out of proportion, and it's very funny, but God's people genuinely were losing their identity living in Babylon and Persia, and it genuinely wasn't a joke.

Mordecai, that's a Babylonian name, after their god Marduk. Esther's name is Persia, a Persian. We do get told her Jewish name, Hadassah, but for the rest of the story, she goes by Esther.

And Esther's two names indicate that, like Christians today, God's people are often torn between two worlds. Now, we don't learn an awful lot about Esther at this point, but we are told in verse 7 that this young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful.

So it should be no surprise that when the king decides to have attractive virgins brought from all over the empire, Esther happens to be one of them. Esther is brought to the king's harem with women from all over the Persian empire.

[13 : 56] And she seems to do rather well for herself, doesn't she? In verse 9, we're told that she pleased Haggai, the chief eunuch, and won his favor. And immediately, he provided her with beauty treatments and special food.

And he assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace. And he moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. So clearly, Esther knows how to play the game of thrones.

She manages to win the favor of Haggai, the eunuch, and is able to do rather well for herself whilst in the king's harem. What's really interesting about the way Esther wins this favor is that it's not for her distinctive godliness.

We might be able to think of individuals throughout the Bible story who win favor from kings and from emperors because they follow God and his commandments. Joseph, for example, won the favor of his owner, his jailer, and eventually the pharaoh because he was prepared to follow God no matter the consequences.

Daniel and his friends too, another example. Daniel was one of the first exiles in Babylon, and his commitment to God brought him favor from both King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon and King Darius of Persia.

[15 : 10] And both Daniel and Joseph also had to suffer in making a stand for their faith, and that's why it's a bit different to Esther. Esther's approach is rather different because well, no one even knows that she follows the God of Israel.

Look at verse 10. Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. So from the looks of things, in the face of the powerful Persian empire, Esther and Mordecai have lost their distinctive identity as God's people.

Their light is hidden under a basket. Now, it's quite possible and fairly likely that had Esther made a stand, had she refused to sleep with the king, she may have encouraged that dangerous wrath of Xerxes and paid for it with her life.

So it's very easy to criticize Esther. And it's interesting, we should note that our author actually doesn't. He merely shows us what happens. We should also note that Esther's certainly not being held out as a moralistic example.

She is definitely compromised here and definitely failing to follow God and his law in sleeping with the king. Verse 15 tells us what happens when she does go and spend a night with the king.

[16 : 28] We're told when the turn came for Esther, the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abahail, to go to the king. She asked for nothing other than what Haggai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the harem, suggested.

And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. So Esther clearly has wisdom in asking Haggai what she should bring with her when she spends her night with the king.

And she seems to impress Xerxes more than any of the other women because we're told in verse 17 that the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women. And she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins.

So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And this is the spur for the rest of the story. Esther being made queen is going to have a huge impact on events in Persia and the protection of God's people.

So what this shows is that although God's people may be without a home, and although they seem to be losing their distinctive identity, God can and will still use them.

[17 : 41] Esther's conduct may be anything but exemplar, but God is able to work through flawed and sinful people to bring his plans and his promises to pass.

We see this throughout the Bible story. God's people continually fail and they flounder. But God never does. And he can work through and even use his people's mistakes.

Now, this isn't to say that our sins or our mistakes are excused. They're not. But the point is, God can still use sinful believers. The point is, God is always working.

And our failings will never stop him. And this is good news for the church today, isn't it? For Christians in countries where persecution and death are very real threats, and the Church of Christ looks weak, God is at work.

We mentioned China earlier. The growth of the gospel in China, despite the crackdown on Christianity, shows that God is at work through his weak people. In our own context, I think it's fairly fair to say that God's people are losing their distinctive identity.

[18 : 53] During this pandemic, the most prominent church leaders like Justin Welby and those who have a media platform have said basically next to nothing about the hope that Jesus brings.

What other message could be more important than that? And yet, silence reigns. Peter in the New Testament says Christians are like exiles.

It's one way in which God's people today and God's people in Persia are incredibly similar. We, like them, live in the world as exiles, but our real home is with God.

And we, like them, are very much in danger of losing our distinctive identity as God's chosen people. And that's also why this is so encouraging.

If we are in a similar position to God's people in Persia, then God can still work through his weak people. The reason is because although Christians might fail, God will not.

[19 : 55] The church and the gospel message might look weak to the world. But in reality, it is the power of God. And that's our last point, the power of God. After Esther's been proclaimed queen, verse 18 tells us the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and his officials.

And he proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality. So we started out with a feast and now we're going to end with a feast. Both are feasts for power.

The first is Xerxes' self-obsessed tribute to his own glory and status. The second, although Xerxes doesn't know it, is a testament to God's power, to the real king.

At the start of chapter 2, King Xerxes heard the advice of his sycophantic nobles. And in verse 4 of that chapter, we're told this advice appealed to the king and he followed it. So on the one hand, we've got the king's decision to listen to his nobles and initiate this search for a new queen.

And that's what brings Esther into the story. But on the other hand, there's a greater king that's guiding events. As we've said, this series is all about asking the question, is God still there?

[21 : 15] Is God still there when it seems like he's silent? Is God still there when people and his people suffer? Is God still there when those who seem to have all the power in the world have absolutely no regard for God?

Is God still there when a novel virus rips through the world causing illness, death, and economic collapse? Well, the answer to all these questions is a firm and resounding yes.

Yes. You can never see the wind, but you know it's there because you can feel it. You can never see oxygen, but you know it's there because you're still breathing. God's just like that.

Esther became queen because God wanted her to become queen. His name isn't in this book, but his hand is clearly working. As God told Paul, my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.

God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He continues to work and is always there for his people. The coronation of Esther, as we'll see as the story goes on, was God's way of preserving his people and saving them.

[22 : 35] No one knew it. Esther, at this point in the story, certainly couldn't have imagined it. And yet, though it might seem that God is silent, he is there, and he is working.

So whether you're here and listening as a believer, or you're here and listening and you're skeptical of God's existence, and you're not sure what to think, the message from the start of Esther is that the world looks powerful, but is in fact very, very weak.

God's people might look weak, but they are in fact people of the living, powerful God, who is always there and never abandons his children.

The first letter to the Corinthians tells us that God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong, and nothing looked weaker to the world than the Son of God himself. Paul says that Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Basically, the way the world sees things is completely upside down.

[23 : 47] The best that a king like Xerxes could manage is a distorted mimicry. The first episode of Esther may have begun with a feast to the power of Persia, but it finishes with a feast that subtly recognizes God's power and the fact that he is in control.

Real strength and real power is in the living God and in his Son and in his church. So, we might not look it, but if we are believing in Jesus, the king who came in weakness, then all of us, we are strong.

And God, the king of creation, is with us. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we know that we can look weak as your people.

We know that we can look at the