May the peace of Jesus Christ reign in your hearts

We had a successful return to worship service this past Sunday with a total of twelve people in attendance. It was good to worship the Lord together as His church. It is still a difficult time and the service is for those who feel comfortable coming. Please don’t feel bad if you prefer to stay home, your well-being is most important.

Please keep each other in prayer as many still face serious difficulties. The Lord does know exactly what He is doing and He is strong. Nothing will happen to us that doesn’t lead to His glory and our good.

I invite you to read the book of Esther in one sitting. It’s not too long and then you can have a good feeling for what is going on. It has intrigue, drama, and ridiculous ironic comedy. It is an enjoyable read.

Yours in Christ

John

*The conclusion, when all has been heard, is: fear God and keep His commandments, because this applies to every person. For God will bring every act to judgment, everything which is hidden, whether it is good or evil.*

 Ecclesiastes 12:13-14

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Esther 1

I thought it would be interesting and instructive to engage in a study of the book of Esther. Of course, that can be said for any book of God’s word. The book is an oddity in the Bible: It never mentions God; the closest it comes to prayer is having a fast; it makes the declaration that the Jews will be saved from the fatal situation they find themselves in but does not attribute their deliverance directly to God; and the two main protagonists of the story, Esther and Mordecai, engage in questionable moral behavior. This is one of the few Old Testament books that is not referenced in the New Testament.

In spite of these things, this book is in the cannon of the Bible. It is the inspired word of God and written under the direction of the Holy Spirit. It is part of the history of God’s chosen people: Israel. God is very much at work in this account, we just have to pay more attention to see where. In the end, we have one more demonstration of almighty God sovereignly guiding the destiny of His people and faithfully protecting them. He is able to use sinful mankind to bring about His ultimate plan.

We have to be very careful with the book of Esther. There are lots of things that happen during the story that could distract us from what is of primary importance: God working to be faithful in His covenant with His people. One of the biggest temptations to being side tracked is the treatment of women. Women’s rights, their standing in society, their God-given worth and dignity as image-bearers of God are all very important. But that is not the focus of this story. A lot has been written about these issues in the book of Esther, but again, this misses the point of the book.

We cannot let ourselves be distracted by the mention of slavery. Again, this is a very important topic; but it is not the topic of Esther. We tend to question some of the things that Esther and Mordecai submit to, how sometimes they seem merciless, and we wonder why they are here in the first place instead of back in Jerusalem. All these things can be looked at on occasion as we go through this book; but we must remain focused on God and His providence.

The story of Esther takes place entirely in Persia, in the city of Susa, one of the four capitals of the Medo-Persian Empire. Susa has been found and studied by archeologists and it was every bit as magnificent as the Bible indicates. This would have been the winter palace of the king because it is unbearably hot there in the summer.

This had previously been the Babylonian Empire. The Jews had been deported here under Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar. These things are prophesied and told about in the book of Jeremiah. The prophet Daniel was taken to Babylon and became an advisor to king Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel foresaw the demise of the Babylonian empire which took place during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar’s grandson, Belshazzar. This is the famous account of the hand writing on the wall.

The Medo-Persian king who led the overthrow of Babylon was Cyrus. Cyrus was mentioned by name by the prophet Isaiah as being the one who would release the people of Israel to rebuild Jerusalem and Judea. The fourth king to sit on the throne of Persia was the king of our story. The Hebrew name for this king was Ahasuerus and the Greek name was Xerxes. He was the king of a vast empire that stretched from India through Egypt to the country of Cush; which is modern day Ethiopia. It went northward into modern day Turkey.

The story of Esther took place after the Jews had been released to go back to Judea in order to rebuild the country, Jerusalem, and the temple. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah give an account of this rebuilding project. The first to return were under the leadership of governor Zerubbabel and the priest Joshua. The first six chapters of the book of Ezra explain the first several years of how things went in the rebuilding of the city. In the seventh chapter of Ezra, Ezra himself comes to Jerusalem to help get things going. It is between these sixth and seventh chapters of Ezra that the events of Esther took place.

The book of Esther opens with a description of the excesses of the Persian court. King Ahasuerus basically threw a party that lasted for six months. All the important people throughout all his kingdom were invited to attend. They would not have all been there the whole time but they would have rotated through in groups. The whole idea was to demonstrate the wealth and power of the kingdom and of king Ahasuerus.

The Bible doesn’t tell us the reason for this display although history says that Ahasuerus was getting ready to attack Greece. By showing all his splendor, he would gain the support of all the districts in his kingdom. By doing so, he would be able to raise a huge army; which he did. It turns out that his campaign against Greece failed. Again, this is an aside; it is not the purpose of the story. But the fact that Ahasuerus had this gathering begins the sequence in which God’s providence begins to work.

After this extended gathering, Ahasuerus had a seven-day party for all the people in the city of Susa. After all, they had put up with this large intrusion into their lives for the past half-year. This party was held in the garden of the palace and was every bit as ornate as the palace itself was. In accordance with Persian custom, each and every drinking cup was different in design from the others and they were all made of gold.

The king had plenty of wine which he lavished upon his guests. No-one had to drink wine or drink more than they wanted; on the other hand, no-one was limited. You can imagine that only a few had the sense to remain sober in the presence of the king. But, apparently, that didn’t matter a whole lot, because the king managed to drink a fair amount himself.

This gathering was for men only, but at the same time, the king’s wife and queen, Vashti, had her own gathering for the women. This banquet was held inside the palace.

On the seventh and final day of his party, king Ahasuerus made a decision: He called for his seven attendants to go and get queen Vashti and bring her out, so that everyone could see how beautiful she was. The Bible allows for consuming alcohol; it is done as a matter of course throughout. However, it does warn against drinking too much and drunkenness. Alcohol affects our thinking which at the very least leads to dumb ideas, and probably to sin. Drunkenness is a serious problem and the Christian is to avoid it. Here we see a dumb idea that leads to sin and more problems.

For whatever reason, queen Vashti disobeyed the king and refused to come to him. There have been many attempts to explain why Vashti didn’t come out. There are many who applaud her for not following the kings order; there are many who give reason that she should have obeyed the king. In the end, all this is a digression and leads to speculation. The Bible doesn’t tell us why she chose to refuse the king; ultimately, it doesn’t matter. The main thing is that she did and by her action, God provided a way to once again save his people from annihilation.

In the Medo-Persian world, the command of the king was law. Breaking any command of the king was a capitol offence. By not following the kings command, Vashti exposed herself to the death penalty.

When he found out that he had been snubbed by his queen, Ahasuerus became extremely angry; another problem caused by excessive alcohol. His heart was no longer merry; he was full of wrath. In addition to the snub, he had been embarrassed in front of all the men of Susa. In Persian culture, honor and shame were very important and the king had just been shamed.

King Ahasuerus called for his seven close advisers. This is our first hint that this king has problems making decisions. This will come up several times throughout the story. Here, instead of dealing with his wife privately, he calls in his advisers and questions them about the laws of the land. He wants to know what the law says is to be done with queen Vashti.

As we read about the advice given by these seven princes of the Medes and Persians, the closest advisers to the king, we see that they are concerned primarily about themselves. They discern that when all the wives of the empire hear about what queen Vashti did, they will treat their own husbands the same way. Now, this was a very real possibility; but their advice didn’t have the best interest of the nation in mind; they were worried about how their own wives would act. How often we see those in charge of the care of a nation put their own interests ahead of those they should protect.

The book of Proverbs mentions the advantage of having counselors several times. One example is Proverbs 15:22 “*Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed*.” So, asking advice from others before doing something is a good plan. But we must make sure that we are asking someone who knows what they are talking about. We have to make sure we trust the person giving the counsel; that they have no ulterior motive. We must take time to consider the advice given to be sure that it is sound and biblical. Additionally, we should not be inebriated when making decisions.

The advisers used what seemed like good logic to the wounded king; they also used flattery. Notice that they referred to her as ‘queen Vashti’ until the crucial moment of verse 19 where they put the decision in the king’s hands when they simply called her ‘Vashti’; this made her seem even less worthy to be in the king’s presence.

Ahasuerus didn’t stand much of a chance; the advice seemed good at the time so he issued the decree. It is mentioned that the laws of the Medes and the Persians cannot be repealed. This was based on the idea that the king spoke with the authority of the gods. Of course, this also led to problems.

Here in the first chapter we have a king who needs help making decisions and has a little too much to drink. His wife disobeys a direct command of the king at the worst possible time; right at the end of a six-month display of his greatness and power. He has advisors who are more than willing to bend things to their own interests. And then the king takes this bad advice and issues an irrevocable decree.

What we have here is a perfect display of godless people living godless lives; absolutely devoid of Christ. But, as we will see in the rest of the account, God is able to use these things to His glory. God has set in motion a way to preserve His people from the threat of annihilation. This threat, has not even come about yet. This is our glorious God; He inhabits eternity; He is faithful to His people.

Prayer

All-powerful and wise God; You are faithful to Your chosen people, the people of Israel. You are also faithful to Your children, all of us who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ. Thank You Lord, for these examples in Your word, that You will always care for us. We know that we need have no fear; You have already seen the future and prepared the way for us.

Help us to understand what You have for us in the Scripture we are studying. Give us the discernment to see Your hand at work so that we may give You praise. It is truly amazing how You are able to bring about Your will and Your plan, all the while using sinful human-beings regardless of their motives.

We offer up a special prayer for Your people Israel. Soften their hearts; open their eyes and ears so that they may understand the Scriptures and come to know that Jesus is their long-awaited Messiah. Once again, call Your chosen people to You. Pour out Your Holy Spirit upon them so that they turn to You. We ask for their protection in this world; shelter them Lord, from their many enemies.

We pray these things in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord

Amen