

# Esther – Sacred or Secular?

Matthew Vander Els • 2018-02-11 • [foundedintruth.com](http://foundedintruth.com)

## MAIN VERSES

1 Corinthians 10:31

Do you ever find yourself searching for something bigger than you? For a community to be a part of? A place founded on truth and love. A place to worship the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and the Son of God. Welcome to Founded in Truth, where we're more than just a fellowship. We're a family. So welcome home.

That's what we're going to do today. If you guys remember when we went over Jonah, was that fun? Yeah, when we actually read the book, did things pop out that you never really realized before? And maybe it was because we had some lenses on from our childhood or growing up. And when we took those lenses off, it may have not been what we expected, but it was edifying and hopefully impactful and applicable.

I would like to enter into the book of Esther today. And for the next few weeks, my hope is that we can kind of review the story of Esther to prepare you for prayer. Esther is a fascinating book—very detailed, awesome story. And there's only two books in the Bible that are named after a woman. This is one of them. Of course, we have Ruth and Esther. And it's dated somewhere between the 4th and 5th centuries BCE. So we have a document here that is roughly 2,500 years old. That by itself is just cool for me. This is pretty cool.

We don't know exactly who the author is. Many commentators will attribute the writing to Mordecai in the story because Mordecai was a scribe, right? Hey, Fitz. We're not sure. We know ultimately that it is here in our scriptures. It is here before us. I believe that God was the ultimate author of this story and has given it to us to study.

For the first seven centuries, according to one commentator, Karen Jo, she has a fantastic commentary on the book of Esther. She states that for the first seven centuries after Yeshua had ascended to the right hand of the Father, there were no commentaries on the book of Esther from the Christian communities. Not a one. 700 years.

Before we go any further, here we go. A couple of sources. If you guys want to read some really great stuff—stuff that I think is really not boring stuff—here are three commentaries that I do recommend. Karen Jobes' *Esther* is fantastic. Her viewpoints and the way that she leads you through the story are amazing. There's also a book by John Jung. He studied under M.T. Wright at St. Andrews and went on to get his own PhD, and he wrote a book, *\*Esther and Her Elusive God, and How a Secular Story Functions as Scripture\**. It's a very thought-provoking book. Also, Ian Dugred's *\*Esther and Ruth\**. So these are just a couple among many that I thought were pretty neat.

## Seven Centuries Without Commentary

So why is it, for the first seven centuries, the Christian community did not feel the need to write a commentary on a book about a woman who stood in her faith and boldness and saved God's people?

Further, when we start looking later in history, we see Martin Luther—the great reformer, right? Pretty stout name in Christianity. He openly declares that he hated the book and thought that it shouldn't be in the Bible. John Calvin, despite your views on Mr. Calvin, he preached a lot. Never once on the book of Esther. Why? Why do many generations of very conservative Christians have no idea what to do with this book?

## Because the Book is Not Religious

Because the book is not religious. You could say the book is written in secular style. Secular meaning not religious. Without God. Very much so. If you took the story out of the Bible, you may mistake it for just another story. And it's one of the only books of the Bible that is solely based and takes place in a pagan land. Even Daniel speaks about Judea and Judah. This is primarily functioning in a pagan land. And it's about a family of Judeans who moved to the capital city of this pagan land.

In the Hebrew canon, the Tanakh, Esther, you know what? In the Hebrew version of Esther, God is never mentioned once. It never once tells us about a dialogue between anyone and God. There's no other book of the Bible that references the book of Esther. And the book is absent of character motivation. What were the internal pursuits of the characters and protagonists of the story, other than saving themselves at one point? What is the integrity of their moral character? We don't know.

If you read the story, these things are left absent. The story reads like a history book, and it leaves so much for the reader to assume and discern and work out by themselves. You could read it like a secular story. A Judean family, a king, a conspiracy, bravery, boldness, only at the last minute. A story where the tables get turned when you're facing death, and people get saved, and then people celebrate. Sounds like a good story. They made a movie about it. It was a good shot. It was a good try.

Even the character and integrity of the main characters are called into question when you actually read the details of the story. Esther and Mordecai, obviously—can we be honest? I'm already being honest. Slightly nervous, but it is what it is. It's what's written in the Word of God, and I'm not ashamed to say what the Word of God says.

## Not Zealous for the Torah

Esther and Mordecai were not zealous for the Torah. There's no indication that they were Sabbath keepers, that they kept kosher, that they cared about the temple in Jerusalem. There's no indication that they were ultra-religious and pious Judeans, followers of God's covenant. No indication in the text.

It's fascinating because there is the Greek text of the book of Esther, right, that was written around the 2nd century BCE, and it has loads of prayers in it. Esther's prayer is like 17 verses long, and it's fun to read. These were additions that came later, and it's obvious they were additions because in her prayer she's saying things like "I abhor the pagans and I would never eat their food and I would never go into their palaces and places and I am set apart and holy," but when you read the rest of the story, it's like "nah man, a eunuch came and gave you special food to keep you pretty for the year, and you ate the king's food." It's interesting, it's just fascinating.

Esther and Mordecai never pray. They are fully assimilated into a pagan culture. Just look at their names. Mordecai is a Babylonian name that comes from Marduk. It's not a Hebrew name. It comes from a Babylonian deity that is really emphasized in the Babylonian creation story, the Enuma Elish, a fun story about his rise to the pantheon.

Although Esther is debatable, many commentaries assert that it comes from Ishtar. Everyone's heard of Ishtar, right? And it's like, what? Wait a second. No, no, no, no. These are the good guys. And I'm not disagreeing with that. What is the author trying to tell us? Why are these characters here with these names?

The author's trying to tell us that Esther and Mordecai are not pious, religious, ultra-religious people worried about God's temple in Jerusalem. They're assimilated into the world that they are in. Didn't go back to Jerusalem when Cyrus allowed it. Moved to the capital city, farther away from Jerusalem. The intention is clear. This is who the characters are. And it's fascinating. Am I scaring some people yet? I'm sure. It's okay. It's okay. God's word is okay. It's great. It's fantastic, and it's here for a reason.

## A Stark Contrast

In the Hebrew canon, the Tanakh, Esther is beside Daniel. This is funny. Daniel. So Daniel is about a religious Jew who refused to allow Babylon to overtake his religious duties even though he was submerged in Babylonian culture. He wouldn't even eat the king's food. That's like chapter one. Won't even touch it.

And then we go into Esther, a woman who willingly got prettied up for one night with the king in hopes that he would choose her as his official wife. There's a contrast, is there not? This is when you go, oh, wow, right? Wow, that is a big contrast. She ate the food prepared by Gentiles. No mention of mikvah rites, no mention of Sabbath, nothing. Quite the contrast.

In the Christian canon, most of our Bibles today, the book of Esther is placed right beside Ezra and Nehemiah. This is another point where you're like, of course it is. The two Judeans who returned to Jerusalem and told everyone to divorce their pagan Gentile spouses. You should have never married them in the first place. You need to keep the covenant of God. We're going to rebuild the temple. We need to get the Torah back into our lives and become faithful.

And then we enter Esther. Mordecai, a scribe that lives in the pagan capital of the world and is a scribe for the pagan king in the pagan world. Whoa. And I love it.

I love it because if we make the Bible into something that it is not, we pervert God's good work with our own. And guys, as much as I would love to make Samson a role model for my son, Samson's a good guy, right? Like he's a good guy, but not the most religious role model, right? We can say the book of Judges is a fantastic G-rated book, right? The book of Judges is the reason why the Bible is not family friendly. It is what it is. We get to the book of Judges and it's like, what? Then he chopped up what? Where?

There's only one character, one character that should get the glory in the book of Esther. And if you say Esther, we will see that she really didn't even hop to save her own people. It wasn't until Mordecai was like, listen, if you don't want to do anything, that's fine, but you and your family

are going to die and God's going to raise up somewhere else. Okay, tell the women to go fast and then I'll step up and do this.

## The Reality of Esther

I love that. Why do you love that? That's not good. Esther is supposed to be this like bride of Messiah shadow or something. No, this is... This is real people in real situations, in a real culture that is not Israel. This story depicts people like me and people like you in the very real lives that you live, in the very real choices that you have made. And this story is about a God that is still faithful to his people. And I love that. It's sad.

There are people, pastors, teachers, public figures that take aspects of Esther and they would bastardize them for their own agenda and teaching, picking apart the book. I truly believe Esther is a part of the Word of God. Despite its secular nature, I hold it sacred because it is very powerful, a very real story. It's fascinating.

An example, Esther and Ishtar, Mordecai and Marduk. I saw one teacher talking about how this means that Esther is a pagan book and Purim is pagan, everything is pagan. This piece of the Bible is pagan. Okay. I mean, if you don't think that a book should be in the Bible, I get it. Can I be honest with you guys? Some of the books in the Bible make me uncomfortable. Judges does not. Job does and Ecclesiastes does. Those books make me uncomfortable because they cause me to smash the mold that I want to place around God and how I think God should operate. I think God should operate this way. And Job and Ecclesiastes just force you to shatter that mold. That's a flesh problem of mine. When I read those books and I'm like, ugh, fighting against the flesh to accept that my God is bigger than I am. We have to recognize that. Just because we don't like something in the Bible... may mean that's the reason it's there.

## Common Names in Ancient Persia

Mordecai, very common name in ancient Babylon and Persia. Common, common name. We have dozens of Persian manuscripts with people, individuals named Mordecai. This was not something that was like, all right, we're going to make this guy, this God in this story. It was a name. I was reading a blog recently from a conservative Jew whose parents weren't really that religious, but he was talking about the reality of Esther. I think it was Esther Unmasked or something. It was a fascinating blog about the reality of Esther when we read it.

And he was speaking about his parents—they weren't really that religious—and they were moved to the States, and the area and time period they lived in, and then I was born, and they

named me Christopher. Think about it. Think about it. They named him Christopher. Christopher. I don't think that they were trying to honor Yeshua by doing that. It made me chuckle.

Another website asserted that Esther was created along with Purim during the Babylonian exile. Take a minute if you need to. During. During. So the book of Esther is about a time period after the Babylonian exile when the Persians came, defeated the Babylonians, and allowed the Judeans to go back to Israel. All things that happened in history. And this author was trying to assert that this book, along with the rest of the Bible, was created during the exile—she was specifically focused on Esther.

This was written during the Babylonian exile because during the New Year celebrations, the Jews were jealous because the Babylonians had drunken parties and orgies and all kinds of sick things. So they made their own New Year's festival that coincided with the Babylonian festival during the exile. And I'm like, how?

The blog went on to assert, very sensationally—like she sounded good but with no citations—that the New Year's Babylonian Festival is a celebration of Marduk and Ishtar. Not really. And it's a fertility festival. And that hamantashen, the little hamantaschen ears that we eat here in Purim, represent female organs and they're filled with fruit and it's to Ishtar. Gahs.

## The Danger of Sensational Claims

We're in a time where knowledge has increased because of the internet. We can fact-check. We have the ability to very easily fact-check now. Ishtar—this is a soapbox moment for me. Ishtar was a promiscuous deity. She was a goddess of justice and war. Primarily she was the guardian—she protected the storehouse that her lover, not her son, Tammuz, stored his grain because he was a fertility deity. Because fertility deities all had to do either with motherhood or mainly vegetation. So Asherah in Canaanite myth was a mother deity because she was a mother and a fertility goddess. Aphrodite, right? Aphrodite, same thing. Ishtar had no stories recorded of her giving birth. She was just promiscuous. She went around and slept around. And she got really mad. Like in the Epic of Gilgamesh, if you guys have read that. You can see the traits where she's a warrior deity. In the story of the descent down to the underworld, she's a backstabber. She's a backstabber and she traded out half of her sentence every year for Tammuz.

A lot of secondary sources will assert that she's a fertility deity. She had nothing to do really with vegetation growing like Baal Hadad did or like Tammuz did. She was a protector of the

storehouse. Think Athena for the Greeks or whatnot. That's more Ishtar. No one was making hamantashen in honor of her fertility rights. I digress.

If something seems sensational and cutting edge and no one else knows about it, and this is rogue information, and I'm smarter than everyone else because I know this information—I'm not just talking about Esther now or Ishtar or Nimrod or anything. I'm talking about everything. If you think that you found this special piece of information because someone wrote a blog post, please, guys, please. If it's sensational, then it probably is. Look for citations. If you really want to read history... It's boring, but it's well worth it if you want to get to the truth of a matter. That was totally off topic. I apologize.

## The Sacred Text

So anyway, Esther and Mordecai, common names. And just because a story is not about what we want it to be about—Jonah, for instance, or stories about super righteous Judeans who would rather die than allow their faith to be diminished—does not mean that it is not God-inspired and edifying for believers like us today. The Bible is divine, but the Bible was written by human hands. It did not fall out of heaven. God thought it wise to have human authors to infuse humanity with his divinity and inspiration in these pages. And I think that's beautiful. And the Bible can stand on its own without our assertions towards it.

So are you guys ready? That was my introduction. No one walked out. That's a good start. And so I want to start by reading Esther. And let's just read what the text says. And there is some historical stuff that surrounds the text. And so if you'll allow me, I'm going to kind of insert that here and there. And this is going to be the start of what the book of Esther is about today. And who gets the glory in the book of Esther and why the weight of Purim is so great. And I'll just let you know, guys, salvation requires celebration. And as believers, we should understand that more than anyone else because salvation only comes from the Lord.

## The King's Banquet

And so the king's banquet. Let's see here. Here we go. So we're going to start right in the first verse. If you're following along with me, 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.

So King Ahasuerus. In Hebrew, his name is Ahasuerus. He's a mighty Persian king. Mighty, mighty, mighty Persian king. And in Greek, his name seems to translate to Xerxes. Does that

name sound familiar? Xerxes. There's been a little debate about this in the 19th century, but over the past 100 years it's been pretty much concluded that this was Xerxes. And where have you guys heard of Xerxes before? In the movie 300. Yep, that was Xerxes.

And so when you watch 300 on your PureFlix subscription, you will see this king, and he's a mighty king, and he sits on a mighty throne. And when they go into battle, where is the king? He's watching from Susa, right? No, he has his own army carrying him so he can oversee the entire battle. And I love how they portrayed him exactly like the writer of Esther portrays him. Whenever people come in front of him, he's like, I am a kind king. I will give you everything you desire. Just give me glory. Honor me as your king, and you can have whatever your flesh desires. That's so perfect here.

## The Mighty Xerxes

And yes, Xerxes was the man who towered over the world during this time period in the 5th century BCE. He grew up in a very wealthy home, exceptionally trained, and he was one of the most dominating kings of his era. Let's see here. Do I have it? I don't. Okay, so imagine a really big map. All of it's green. And everything that's green is what Xerxes rules over. What we would call, at that time period, the ruler of the world. He was the ruler of the known world. Everything was his. Except for Greece, but these things happen. Not completely Greece. There was some rebellion there. We'll get into that.

And the thing about Xerxes is he didn't take all of this land. See, the kings before him, like Cyrus or Cambiasus II, that was the guy who went to Egypt and threw the cats at them to win, and to become the pharaoh of Egypt because he defeated them. And then we have Darius, who was Xerxes' father. These were the fighting kings of Persia, and they're the ones who extended the boundaries.

## Xerxes and the Persian Empire

And then Xerxes comes on the scene. Kings have lots of different sons, and they choose one to hand everything over to, and Xerxes was that guy. Here you go. Oh boy. So yeah, he didn't really do a whole... he's kind of a spoiled guy. We'll just say that.

There is a Greek historian by the name of Herodotus, and he speaks a lot about Xerxes. Thank goodness for this guy. Herodotus was a Greek historian who lived around the same time. Cicero is the guy who called Herodotus the father of history, but there were other guys who called him the father of lies, so you can just kind of take your pick. The thing about Herodotus as a

historian is, when you win the battles, you write the history, right? This guy didn't write that way. He would go out and try to find evidence of both sides and put together a very neutral stance. Sometimes it didn't work out that way, but that was his pursuit. So we appreciate things from him.

Of course, we know that Xerxes' father was Darius, who was a great king that conquered various nations. And the Persian kingdom — I want you guys to really get a feel for this — the Persian kingdom was a huge kingdom of different nationalities, cultures, religions, languages, just everything. And they all submitted with one voice to the king of Persia. And of course, Darius and Xerxes were probably of the Persian faith, very pagan. They didn't believe in Moses. They didn't believe in God. They didn't believe in Torah. Pagan kings. They didn't think Torah was important. Pagans. What were they? Pagans. They lived in Susa. Pagans. Far away from Jerusalem, in the Iran area, if you will.

And just like Jonah, when we begin to read this story, we're faced with a question. And the question is, is God only concerned with Jerusalem and with Israel? No, he's concerned with the entirety of his creation. We have an apple of the eye, but we have everything else. And so as we go through this series, we will discuss where is God in this story, because I believe he's there, and I believe he's accomplishing his mission, and I believe he is still faithful.

## The Postal System

So one of the greatest achievements in ancient Persia was — can anyone guess it? The postal system. That was a letdown, I apologize, but that's what it was. And it was so important, because when the god-man named Xerxes or Darius spoke — when the King of Kings, which is what their title was, spoke — how are you going to get the word out across the big green blob on the world that you imagined? How are you going to get a letter to everybody? Invent UPS? No. USPS? UPS?

And here's something cool — geeking out because I love the history behind this, and it's so cool, this is the time period that is represented in the story. Herodotus writes this. He's describing something called the Angorium. It's the ancient Persian system of mounted carriers. They'd be on horseback and they'd go out. And I think of that — what was it, that Kevin Costner movie about the mailman or something? The postman or something. Anyway, here's what he writes. He writes, "It is said that as many days as there are in the whole journey, so many are the men and horses that stand along the road." Each horse and man at the interval of

a day's journey, and these are stayed neither by snow, nor rain, nor heat, nor darkness, from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed.

Why does that sound familiar? Anybody? Why does that sound familiar? Because it's not the official, but it's the unofficial creed of our postal system — neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these carriers from swift completion of their appointed rounds. That's our unofficial creed of the postal service. The reason why it's not official is because in 2015 we actually shut down the postal system for a day. Yeah. But that's what — it's not official, just unofficial. This was created under the reign of the Persian kings, which I hope that's not the only thing you walk away learning today, but if it is, I guess that's me.

## The King's Party

And as this great king — he's rich and powerful, the most powerful man in the world — how does he use his power and riches? Does he help the widows? Does he choose to help the poor? Does he help young girls out of abusive situations? No, no, no. In the third year of his reign, he gave a feast to all of his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media, and the nobles and governors of the provinces, were before him while he showed the riches of his royal glory and his splendor and the pomp of his greatness for many days — 180 days.

So this is a king that holds parties, drinking parties, where the nobles and the vassals and the generals and the soldiers and all the important people are brought in to give him glory. And girls are brought in — not women, girls are brought in. This was a sick, sick, sick atmosphere that he put on, as we continue reading. And you could go to this party, and you could eat, and you could drink, and you could do whatever you desired.

Fascinating, because when we see something like that, we almost get disgusted. And I heard one pastor — he was speaking, and he asked the question. He said, how many of us recognize our disgust for this king and what he stands for is rooted in jealousy? And I was like, what do you mean, rooted in jealousy? He's like, what if you had unlimited power and unlimited wealth? What would you do? Well, you know, give to the poor, buy a nice car, help churches out, buy a bigger house maybe. What would you do if you had that much absolute power? Would you host a party? Would you invite all the important people to it? Get selfies posted on Facebook — look at me. All the actors and actresses, all the celebrities and political leaders, all the super wealthy and important people that come to the party simply because you ask them to and they want to be around you.

We get a unique insight here on why sometimes we follow certain TV shows or movies or celebrities, and it really caused me to audit my life. Is it jealousy? Is it rooted in jealousy? Because I can't do that.

## Six Months of Glory

And this party lasted how many days? Six months! Six months! You get invited to this party and you have a six month vacation with free food, open bar, sit in a hammock for six months. That sounds okay to a lot of us, I think, right? Maybe? I mean, you know. Well, no, because he's a pagan, I don't want to agree with that. But if he wasn't a pagan, then maybe, yeah, sounds like a pretty good deal. Six months.

The only purpose for him throwing this party is to show forth the riches and glory of this king. Six months of cheering on the king, toasting the king that is worshipped as god. We worship a different king, don't we? We bow to the king that has been given all power and authority, not just on earth, but — see, our king was the one that was proclaimed and crowned on earth, who came in the clouds of heaven to be seated at the right hand of God. He was given all power and authority on earth and in heaven. This is Yeshua.

And so it causes me, as a believer, to look at this king and look at my king. I can't help but do it. And so as we go through the story, just keep that in the back of your mind. And what is amazing is what the author of Esther is trying to tell us here — what he's trying to give us here — he's trying to demonstrate that Xerxes can offer us every single thing that our flesh desires. Why do you want that nicer car? Glory. Why do you want that extra house or bigger house? Glory. Why do you want nicer clothes? Glory. Glory. Show it off. Glory.

## 180 Days

You guys ready? It gets better. You ready? So six months, right — has anybody ever been to a party? I mean, maybe like before you were serious about your faith, or, you know, getting your life down. Has anyone ever gone to a party before? Maybe, yeah. I mean, I didn't get into the scene that much, I went to a couple. Okay, three people admit that they've gone to a party, birthday party. How long did the party last? What, a night maybe? A night? 180 days! You're starting to remember the next morning and you're like, ugh — nah, that's not my scene. 180 days.

It's not done yet. And when these days were completed — what days? 180, the key — and also, 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 — so the king is fixing to make a command about drinking — there is no compulsion, for the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as every man desired.

So you have six months of a private party with probably over roughly 15,000 people going berserk. And now you're going to open the doors for a week, and even the beggar can come in. The beggar comes in, and you see the marble, and you actually get to be here, and you're like, can I touch this stuff? It's a golden couch. I mean, right? The Greeks actually — so after the Persians retreated from Greece, they confiscated some of these couches. Like, this is documented, it's insane. And they made a way to make them comfortable somehow, I don't know, right? But these weren't just, like, spray painted. These were solid gold couches. How many of you guys have a ring that's gold on right now, or an earring?

## The Persian Palace and Its Opulence

The pews were made of gold. And this was a reality of the Persians. And when you walk in, they're like, what would you have to drink? And I'm like, I mean, I've never had royal wine before. Sure, here's your solo cup. It's made of gold. Gold and solo cups. The best wine in the kingdom. And everything's purple. Why is it purple, purple, purple? Purple was the most expensive dye to be made during this time period. And so you didn't have to walk around with big name brand stuff on. You just had to wear purple. If you wore purple, people were like, ooh, he's loaded if he can do that. The curtains were purple. The toilet paper was probably purple. I mean, everything. Why? What does that mean? Royalty, richness, glory to this king Xerxes.

And to top it off, he gives an edict. So protocol, when you're with a king, generally states, now this is a debated issue, but I think it's this way, that when the king drinks, you drink, right? And so everyone has their royal wine or whatnot. And they're waiting until everyone's ready, until the king says, all right, let's do it. And then you drink your royal wine. And that's etiquette even until today, right? If you're at a party, cups, shots, whatever, you wait, right?

## The Military Order

So in the Revolutionary War, soldiers would line up, right? And they would all load their muskets at once, and they would wait for the command of the captain. Ready, aim. Fire! And then what would happen? Everybody would fire at once. And then if the skirmish happened and you were up close and personal, with your bayonets on, you can't organize this anymore, right?

So what is the phrase that tells every man to fire as much as you can at the enemy right now?  
Fire at will!

The king's decree with alcohol was fire at will. This is, and I'm blowing this up because God have mercy. Some of us have been to parties that lasted a night. That's insane. Insane, right? This is what the king was about. This is what Xerxes was about. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

## **The Feast and the Feasting**

So all the soldiers were drinking for six months. Military feasts. They've been at war. They're preparing to go to war. And then another feast that even the poor folk, like you and I, can walk into, right? But no women were really invited to this feast. The women had their own feast with Vashti. So this is just all guys for over six months. And the poor women that were at the feast were not there because they were invited. They were there to be told to do what they want.

If this was made into an accurate movie, it would be rated R without the first chapter even getting 10 verses in for the reality of what was taking place with this king. And here he is on his great throne, overseeing everything. Yes, glory, glory. Look at me. Look at all I have. And I'll give you everything that your flesh wants if you just look at me and declare my glory. Declare me the God-King.

## **The Hollywood Version and the Reality**

Yeah, it really goes up with the 300 portrayal now. I know we've seen that movie, One Night with the King. You guys seen that? It was a great effort to portray Esther. And I put a picture. That was the king. It's a Jesus-looking, royal kind of figure. I mean, he's nice, right? So Xerxes was also written about as being very, very, very, very handsome. I don't know exactly what that looks like, but sure, that guy. But in the movie, this guy was a pretty legit fella, right? I mean, he was pretty good-looking. You could probably go to church with him. But this is not the real Xerxes.

The real Xerxes was a very sick, sick, arrogant ruler over his land. Nasty human being.

## **The Omission of God**

And we've come this far in this book, and what is missing? Who is missing? God is missing. No Torah, no priesthood is mentioned, no sacrifices, no quoting other books of the Bible, no texts

of prayer, no miracles, nothing. And it's a gross, curious omission that takes place here and for the rest of the book of Esther.

How many of you, when you look in the mirror, this is your life? Matt, I don't think I've ever drank for over six months straight and partied. Oh, that's not what I was referring to. I'm referring to the omission of God, the omission of His Word, the omission of prayer, the absence of God's seeking, God's will in your life, the absence of this faithful pursuit, the absence of you pursuing intimacy with God.

God silhouettes throughout the whole book of Esther. And a silhouette is a portrait that is imaged by the absence of something. We all know this. And what I hope to assert as we go through this book is something very simple. Very simple. A truth that will never fade. A fact that will always be that God is still here in your life right now. No matter how far you feel from God, no matter what is going on with your life, despite your prayer life being next to nothing, despite an inch of dust that has somehow collected on your Bible, despite the absence of meditation on God in your life and his will for you, despite the emptiness that you feel in your life at times, despite the addictions that may be ruining your life, despite the hardness that's going on in your marriage, despite the fears and uncertainties that you have when you wake up in the morning, despite the health diagnosis, despite everything that would normally epitomize the absence of God, I would like to proclaim and assert with such boldness that God remains faithful.

And that is why this book is here.

## Vashti's Refusal

On the seventh day, when the king's heart was merry with wine. So it took him 187 days of drinking to get him to smile. Some things don't fill voids, guys. He commanded Zethar and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus. So you guys know what a eunuch is, right? A eunuch is someone who used to have a very, very, very outstanding and wonderful and fulfilling life.

So he charges these men to go bring Queen Vashti, his wife, before the king with her royal crown in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty and how beautiful she was. 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. Kids are having a great time.

So the king gets drunk, okay? 187 days. I would have assumed this would have happened long before, but it does. It happens now. And he wants Vashti to come, not for his sake. See, he's

already shown off his gardens, and he's already shown off his wine, and he's already shown off his mass production of golden solo cups and silver and gold couches that people can sit on and purple everywhere, and he's already shown off all of this glory. I know what more I can show off. I know what more I can show everybody else, make them give me glory. Whoa, look what else he has. I'll bring my wife in, and I will display her beauty for everyone to look at as a trinket. And they will be even more just wowed with me and who I am.

## The Talmudic Context

So, of course, the Talmud mentions that the context here is that he wanted her to come only wearing her crown, naked. Show up naked in the palace, along with all the other women that are already there. No—my wife, my wife—to show her off. And some people would be like, no, that's not in the text. And they're right, it's not in the text. But whether you agree with that or you agree that he was wanting her to come clothed, it makes no difference because it's the same pursuit.

Look at my wife. And she has the dignity and the honor to say, no, I will not be subjected to the slavery of your indignant commands for me. I am worth more than that. I'm adding that in, but this is what I believe has happened. She didn't come because she didn't want to be shown off. Vashti seems like a pretty legit woman. I mean, in this circumstance.

## The Conflict and Decree

Now, guys read this commentary and they read the next couple of verses and they're like, yeah, she disobeyed her husband though. Women, hopefully you can see, wow, that took a lot of boldness for her to be like, no, I will not. I will not. I am your wife. I'm not your slave. I'm not your concubine. I am your wife. I'm not a trinket. I'm your wife. Not something you show off.

And so a conversation ensues about how the king should respond. And we know how he should respond. The king should respond by saying, women have a better commentary on this than us guys. I don't know what we're doing. Honey, I'm sorry. I got a little drunk. I'm sorry. I made a bad call. I'm sorry. He doesn't. He speaks to the men. And the men tell him, they're like, oh, what if all of our women have some dignity and refuse to submit themselves to our corrupt judgment? Oh, we can't have that happen. No, no, no, no, no, no. Here's what you need to do. You know what he told him to do? He told him to sign a decree for Vashti to never see him again.

So he signs a decree. Vashti, you can never see me again. This is when you go, ah. There's humor in here. There's honor and shame and there's humor in here. You can never see me again. All right.

## Sin Bending Inward

Augustine and Martin Luther state that sin and corrupted humanity bend inward on themselves. I find this fascinating. Fascinating. It bends in on itself. In other words, when we seek to glorify ourselves and because of our sin, it's all about me, my mind, my fame, my popularity, my glory.

Everything's about me, my hurts, my wants. Guys, we only end up with misery when we seek such things. And we'll only find misery when we pursue this type of glory in our lives. Sin bends in on itself. Oh, yay, this is a great idea. No. And when we pursue these things, all that's left at the end of the tunnel is corruption and misery. Glory was always meant to go one place, and that's to God. We were never meant or designed to get this glory of being the gods. We were meant to give it.

## The King's Vulnerability

And here's a perfect example. How did the king get to this point where he's divorcing his wife, where he has been made vulnerable? Guys, do we like to be vulnerable? Everybody still, I love it. No, being vulnerable is horrible. It's horrible. No, we don't like being vulnerable. When you finally do it, you feel better or whatnot. I'm going through this right now. Yeah, it's a horrible feeling, but we have masculinity and we are the domineering type. We are not vulnerable. The king was forced into a position of vulnerability in front of all of his dudes. And he's like, what do I do now? Say that she can never see you again. Yeah, that'll show her.

So he's faced with vulnerability, and he makes poor choices, and he takes bad advice. He should never have taken advice. And how did it come to this? Because he was pursuing his own glory. The author is building up in these first chapters: he's pursuing his own glory. Glory is not fitting for us. Solomon, ask him about that. David, ask him about that. Ask many biblical stories and characters about this circumstance, because it happened to them as well.

And here, Xerxes loses his wife because if you're so focused on you receiving the glory and it's all you, you, you, you, you, then it will be impossible for anyone to live with or around you.

## Xerxes and the Campaign

So this gathering that happens in chapter 1, it's kind of enigmatic. We don't know what's going on or what prompted it. Was he just a party boy? So Herodotus talks about King Xerxes planning to invade Greece, 300, right? And before he does it, he has a huge banquet. I don't know if it was 180 days long, but it was a huge banquet where he stirs up the military and the nobles and the vassals and everybody that was listed here for six months. And he gives this stirring speech: Man, we're going to get them Greeks, we're going to kick them and get them and do what we do, right?

Remember, this is the guy who is living in his father's fame. Now he can up one. Now he can go and take—man, I can be victorious. We're going to go do this. A lot was riding on this, right?

And so this campaign launched in the spring of 481 CE, in Xerxes' fifth year, a couple years after this. And for over two years, Xerxes found himself engaged in battles in the West as the Greeks and the Persians fought one another. Thermopylae was the most famous. There was also Salamis and a few others that the Greeks engaged in battles with the Persians.

## Utter Defeat

And finally, two years later, Xerxes left Greece and went to Sardis. And the commentaries say that he wintered there—I guess it's like taking a vacation or just chilling out. And he didn't return to Susa until 479, a year and a half later. Utter defeat. Everybody's looking up to you. You are God. How could this happen? Shame's upon you now.

Man, have you ever been in a situation where maybe you just lost your job or something that makes you feel ashamed of for whatever reason, and you feel very vulnerable, right? This is him now. And I can't help but think, is this when he began to miss his wife? I'm adding a lot here, I know. But I'm just thinking out loud. Is this when he began to think, man, that'd be real nice if Vashti was here? I mean, she was always great at giving me some advice or telling me, I'm a good king. You're a good king. You're lifting me up. But I don't have her because I made some bad decisions. I don't know. That's an assertion by me. Maybe, maybe not.

## Come and Take Them

At the Battle of Thermopylae, and they did this in the movie, but it goes overlooked. So in the Battle of Thermopylae, 300 movie, pure flicks. When Xerxes came and faced off with Leonidas, he told Leonidas to lay down your weapons. And you guys remember what Leonidas said back? They got their shields in the movie, and they were like, oh, come and take them. And then all of us in America would go, oh, yeah, come and take our guns, right?

This happened, right? And the phrase was *malan lave*. It's the same phrase that was used in the Texas Revolution. And you see it in a lot of tea party flags and stuff, right? This was it: come and take them. Till this day, this phrase is printed on the official emblem of the Greek Army Corps, right? So if you joined the Greek Army, they're going to be like, hey, welcome to the army. Glad you're here. We were the guys who beat Xerxes. This is legitimate. The shame of his defeat is still in the minds of Greece.

Man, I'd be crying in a corner missing my wife right now.

If you chase glory, you will only ever find misery. It may take a while for it to bend, but it will.

## Vashti Remembered

And we jump over into the second chapter here. We're not going to read a lot into this, but I'm trying to set up the king. So he was a key player in the story. And after these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus was abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Again, we can assume... Is he mad? He's like, yeah, I should have done that, or maybe I shouldn't have done that. It doesn't tell us. He just thought about it. What did he feel about it? Author of Esther didn't feel like writing that in there, so we can only assume, which is fine. That means that's not the point. We need to keep moving.

Then the king's young men who attended him said, we have an idea. Let beautiful virgins be sought out for the king, and let the king appoint officers in all provinces of his kingdom to gather together all of the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa, the citadel, under custody of Haggai, the king's eunuch. Who is in charge of the women? Let their cosmetics be given to them, and let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti. This pleased the king, and he did so.

## The Bachelor, Persian Edition

What should I do, guys? Listen, you need to bring a bunch of hot chicks in here and have them audition for you one at a time, and then when you find one that you really like, then the one that you like the best, that's it. Sound familiar? This is not a children's story, but this is talking about today, too. How do I fill this void in my life? Well, find all the hot chicks you can find. Come out one by one until you find the one that you like the best. That's the one that can be your wife. There's a lesson here.

But this is not a children's story. Jonah was not a children's story. This is really not a children's story because this is like The Bachelor, but the Persian edition, and they take it a step further.

The women did not go in before the king and do a talent show. They didn't go in and simply sing a song or do a little dance. They went in to impress him. They sat for a year in the cosmetic harem, eating a special diet and putting on myrrh and perfumes to have a single sexual experience with the king for one night. And whichever one pleased him the best, he would choose. It states this in chapter 2. They would come in one by one at night, and in the morning they would leave. We don't like to talk about that. This was Persian culture. This is the reality of the story. And he would choose his official queen.

## The Harem Collection

And it's amazing because many commentaries—what's fascinating is many commentaries would talk about how the king's vast wealth and everything. He didn't simply have one queen. I mean, he had one official queen that are listed and mandates and so on and so forth. But he had a harem. These girls didn't just go home afterwards. They stayed for him just in case one day. It was like a collection for him. Does that kind of mess with you a little bit? Like, not Jesus. Not Jesus.

Here's the point I want to get across today. You've got for a long time to get to the point. I know. I want to get to one point today, and I want you to ask yourself this.

## What King Do You Serve?

What king do you serve? It's a simple question. What king do you represent today? Do you represent a king that will give you the desires of your flesh as long as you submit to him and live the way that he lives? In the words that you speak, in the actions that you take, in the way that you think? Or do you serve a king who has already given everything for you?

We need to make a decision and we need to audit ourselves. We can proclaim Jesus the Christ and Yeshua the Messiah and Yeshua the Lord and Yeshua our King. All we want is—but if our reflection looks more like Xerxes than it does Yeshua, if it looks more like the kingdom of Persia than the kingdom of God, if we're pursuing status and glory and women and whatever else, whatever else—see, we always think of money and girls and sex and all that.

Oh, you've got to fill a void. There's a lot of other things that fill voids that we try to put in that void in our life other than God in hopes that it will one day fill it up. We're not serving the king

that gives life if that's us. You're serving the one that brings misery. And if Xerxes' life reminds you of your own, even in aspects of it, then maybe you should take that into consideration right now. Right now. What are you willing to do for God? Why would you ask that question? Because it's an honest question. What are you willing to do for God? What are you unwilling to do for God? What are you unwilling to do for God today?

## What Are You Willing to Do for God?

This book is packed full of self-reflection and audits for a reason. I thought we were just going to be talking about a girl and a king and some people getting saved, huh? Well, we'll come to that. It's great. Next week we're going to talk about Mordecai and Esther. And this will be fun because they are kind of the heroes of the story or the good guys of the story, but they're not the ones that get the glory in the story.

## The Heroes of the Story

And this story is a constant reminder. Just like when we were singing in worship today, despite where I am, God, you are with me. You never let me go. Never. That's what this book is about in the rawest fashion. God was going to be faithful no matter what. Relentless. And so I encourage you, if you want to go ahead and read ahead, it's a very raw story. It's an ancient story. It's a beautiful story. Sometimes it's an uncomfortable story. And I believe that when we dive in and let the scriptures speak for themselves, just reading the text and what the text does say and what it doesn't, it will bring an even greater weight to Esther. The book being in the Bible as well as our celebration of Purim.

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