



JESUS IS A BETTER KING

Part 1 of Esther

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Esther 1:1-9 | September 16, 2012

My great-grandparents told me stories of a mighty dragon that descended on the Holy Temple. The people had rebelled against God. "I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods and worshiped the work of their own hands." In his anger, God turned his people over to the fearsome enemy, King Nebuchadnezzar, the dragon of Babylon, through whom the fury of God burned against my people. "Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon has devoured me, he has crushed me, he has made me an empty vessel, he has swallowed me up like a dragon."

The tears of my people flowed like a river, but they could not quench the fires that consumed our land. Into the wilderness we were led, defeated and destroyed. The God we'd forsaken, we thought he'd forsaken us. But even in our darkest moment, God would not leave or forsake his people. Once more, he made us a promise. "I will not look on you in anger, for I am merciful, I will not be angry forever. Only acknowledge your guilt, that you rebelled against the Lord your God. . . . I will take you, one from a city and two from a family, and I will bring you to Zion."

For seventy years, the people of God lived in Babylon. Over time, Babylon began to wither and a great lion rose from the east: Cyrus, the king of Persia. His armies consumed the world. He set his gaze on the remains of the great dragon's lair, Babylon. There, Cyrus led a cunning attack and the kingdom fell. Cyrus was a great and good king and did not believe in keeping men as slaves. During the first year of his reign, he issued a decree that freed the Jews.

God stirred the hearts of his most devoted people to journey back to Jerusalem and rebuild his temple. "And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem." Cyrus went the way of all men. "Behold, three more kings shall arise in Persia, and a fourth shall be far richer than all of them. And when he has become strong through his riches, he shall stir up all against the kingdom of Greece."

Behold, Ahasuerus, Xerxes the Great. Under Xerxes, the empire prospered and so did the Jews who did not return to Jerusalem. Among these Jews was a family of the Tribe of Benjamin. They gathered all they could scrape together and headed out from Babylon for the richest city the world had ever known, the Persian capital of Susa. During the journey, both the mother and father died, leaving a baby girl to Mordecai. Little did my cousin know that I would grow to be a woman the world would never forget.

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

I'm glad we're a church that gets excited about books of the Bible. If you're going to be excited about something, that's something good to be excited about, amen? Today, we start Esther: God's Perfect Work through Imperfect People. Esther is one of only two books of the Bible that has its name after a woman. For you ladies, God bestows particular dignity, value, and worth for you in the pages of Scripture, but particularly in the book of Esther.

And as we begin our study of the book of Esther, I want to give you a bit of background and history. It's one of the last books written in the Old Testament. It was written about two and a half thousand years ago, so we're looking at quite an ancient book by every account. We don't know who the author is. There's no internal evidence for who wrote this book. We know, ultimately, God, the Holy Spirit wrote the book of Esther, and perhaps it was Mordecai, her cousin, who penned it, some scholars would say.

Jews, in particular, love the book because it shows the beginning of the Feast of Purim, which we'll get to in a few weeks. Christians, however, have not, quite frankly, known what to do with the book. For the first seven centuries of the Christian church, zero commentaries were produced on the book of Esther. We sort of treated it like Superman does kryptonite or a cat does water. We just stayed away. We didn't know what to do with this particular book.

Then comes along John Calvin, one of the great Bible teachers and commentators. In the history of the church, we have no record that he ever preached a sermon from the book of Esther, and he certainly didn't write any commentary on it. In addition, Martin Luther, the great Protestant Reformer, he said it was basically a horrible book. He was sad that it was ever written and said it shouldn't even be in the Bible.

It's that controversial, and part of the reason it is so controversial is it's difficult to interpret. At no point does the book of Esther tell us what their internal motivations were, what God's external perspective is. It doesn't give us any commentary, just history. Some of you will ask, "Well, what does the rest of the Bible have to say about the book of Esther?" Nothing.

So, as we go through it, in your women's Bible study or your Community Group, you can duke it out. You can debate, dialogue, discuss, and duke out what exactly is meant by the historical record of the story of Esther. Perhaps to aid your studies, you want to grab a commentary. The best one is written by Karen Jobes and she's written a fantastic commentary on Esther. But what I find particularly curious is one section where she says, "It's probably not a good idea to preach or teach through the whole book of Esther."

So, guess what we're going to do? Please turn in your Bibles to Esther 1:1, as we are going to spend our time in the ensuing months going verse by verse, word by word, through Scripture. We do this because the Bible says that all Scripture is God-breathed and profitable. Well, that would include Esther. Amen? Alright, here we go. We're gonna launch right in.

XERXES THE GREAT

We'll start with a who. Who's the first character that God, the Holy Spirit, introduces in this epic story? Well, we read in Esther 1:1, "Now in the days of Ahasuerus." Alright, so we've got to unpack this guy named Ahasuerus. His Persian name is Ahasuerus. His Greek name is Xerxes. You heard of Xerxes? You shouldn't watch it, but if you have seen Frank Miller's film, *300*—a bunch of guys who did P90X and a bunch of gals who don't wear enough clothes, that's why I can't recommend it. It is the story of King Xerxes, this man.

How many of you guys play *Assassin's Creed*? Okay, if you raised your hand, you're new to Mars Hill and you don't know that we make fun of men like you. So if you're one of those guys who's really good at video games, you know, tell your mom "Hi" in the basement where you live, but what you will note is one of the characters in *Assassin's Creed* is Xerxes. Okay? You've got to say it like that. Xerxes.

Now, Xerxes was the great Persian king and he ruled and he reigned. He towers, in human history at that time, and he, in every way, towers over the life and the story of Esther. He is, at this point, in his mid-thirties. We're gonna read in just a moment that this was the third year of his reign. He assumed the throne at about the age of thirty-two, so now he's, let's say, thirty-five or thirty-six. This means when Esther enters the scene in a few weeks, she's fifteen to twenty years younger than he is.

He is a man who grew up very wealthy, very affluent. He is commented upon at quite length by a man named Herodotus, so a lot of what I'll teach you as we spend our time together comes from Herodotus. He was a Greek historian. He's actually called "The Father of History." And the way history was typically told in that day, whichever nation won the war, they would hire the historian to write the story. So, it's really not history. What it is is P.R.

Now, what Herodotus did, he had a perspective that was different. He decided to try to be objective and neutral, and so he would go to interview people who were eyewitnesses to events, and he would look at all sides of historical records, and he would try, as much as was possible, to present an objective, neutral view of history. And much of his work centers around the Persian Empire, because it had conflict with Greece, and around this man, Xerxes, as he was known, Xerxes the Great.

The Empire

Well, where is the story taking place? Again, chapter 1, verse 1. "This is the Ahasuerus," or Xerxes, "who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces," or satraps. There's a bit of a theological debate there. The big idea is this: he is the most powerful man on the earth. There's no one who rules as Xerxes rules.

His father, Darius, was a legendary king, ruled some thirty-six years, was a man who expanded his empire by taking over, conquering, and assimilating multiple nations. So, they are a kingdom that spans multiple nations and peoples. They have different races, different ethnicities, different languages, and different religious convictions.

Darius, and perhaps Xerxes, if they had any religious devotion, it would have been Zoroastrianism, so they are pagans. They do not worship the God of the Bible. And it says that they live, at this point, in Susa. If you want a modern-day place for that, it's around Iran, so we're talking, away from Jerusalem, away from the temple, away from the priesthood, away from the presence of God on the earth.

And the question arises: is God working in history just in Jerusalem or in other nations? Is God just present in the temple or is he, to some degree, also present elsewhere? And this great story of Esther shows, yes, God is at work in nations beyond Jerusalem, even pagan, godless nations like this Persian kingdom.

And this man, Darius, he had this enormous empire that the heathen handed to his son. And the way it worked in that day, kings were considered like gods, and they would have multiple wives and they practiced polygamy. Women were widely mistreated. In addition, they had an enormous harem, and so the palace would include an entire section just to house all of the women who were there to please the king, whatever his nefarious desires might be. As corrupted as your mind can conceive is the reality of life in that day. These men make Hugh Hefner look Little League in comparison to the kind of lavish lifestyle, opulence, and abuse of women that they enjoyed.

So, this man, Darius, the great king, he had multiple wives and multiple children, because it was believed if you had many wives and a huge harem and lots of children, it showed the greatness of the king and the kingdom. Then he had a decision to make nearing the end of his reign: "To whom shall I give my kingdom that I've labored for?"

And he gave it to his son Xerxes, and this is just a narcissistic, spoiled, rich kid who grew up in the palace, never worked a day in his life. He didn't go to war, he didn't fight, he didn't labor, he didn't struggle. He probably, if it was according to custom, didn't meet his father until he was five. In that day, men conceived children; they didn't raise children. So, you wouldn't even meet your dad until your fifth birthday. You were raised by your mom. In this case, you were raised in the women's quarters in the palace. You were raised with the other wives in the harem. So, he grew up a very spoiled boy. He lacked nothing and then he was given the kingdom that his father ruled over.

And because the nations have changed in name, to give you an account, he basically ruled from Sudan all the way up to Pakistan today, all the way over to Greece. I'll show you a bit of a map. So, everything in the green was the kingdom of Xerxes that he inherited from his father, Darius. In that day, they would have also called this "the world." Okay? Okay? That's the world. Okay? There weren't a ton of people, yet, in Mexico or Detroit. Right? Or wearing kilts in Scotland. Right? That hadn't happened yet. At this point, the majority of people on the earth lived in this region, and he ruled all of it.

So, imagine today, one ruler, one political, spiritual leader rising up with such power that they can turn Egypt, Libya, Israel, Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan into one nation under their rule. Even today, that would be amazing, right? Just to get two of these nations to get along would be a miracle. Right? These peoples, historically, have fought, they have not liked one another, they have oftentimes been adversaries and not allies. You know that a king and a kingdom is great when he can turn enemies into his kingdom, all subject to his rule.

Xerxes is nothing short of a god in the minds and eyes of those who observe his rule and reign. There's no one at the level of authority, and power, and might. There has never been, to this point in the history of the world, an empire this large, this vast, this affluent, and this powerful. It's hard to overstate who this man, Xerxes, was.

Some of you may ask, "How did he get his edicts out into these various cultures and nations? How did he enforce, if not impose, his will?" Well, they created, actually, the first postal system, and as he would give decrees, it was like a word from God, and it was believed that he was a god-man. Sound familiar? And he called himself the king of kings. Sound familiar? And it was believed that he spoke with the voice of the sun, and that when he said something, it was like Bible, it was inerrant, it was perfect, it was to be immediately obeyed.

And they would take the decrees of King Xerxes and they would send them through the empire through the postal system, and his postal system, to deliver his decrees, came up with this particular motto—tell me if this sounds familiar. “Neither snow, nor rain, nor gloom of night stays these valiant couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” What’s that sound like? The U.S. Postal Service. We stole that from King Xerxes. The whole U.S. Postal System should say thank you to King Xerxes for inventing postal routes and also their motto.

This man ruled over about roughly 3 million square miles. That’s roughly about the same size as the United States of America. He is a big deal. He is the U.S. president, plus Bill Gates, plus everyone else combined on the earth. There’s no one in—I could just go on forever. Everybody who’s rich, powerful, famous, cool, he’s it, add a zero. That’s Xerxes. You get my big idea. He’s a big deal.

The Palace

Now, when did all of this happen? Verse 2. “In those days when King Xerxes sat on his royal throne in Susa,” modern-day Iran, “the citadel, in the third year of his reign.” Not only does this guy have a palace, he has two. You know you’re rich when you’re like, “I’ve got a backup palace in case I blow a tire on the first one.” That’s a rich guy. Right?

And when they have a palace, their palace is on the acropolis. That means “high point,” so he sits high and exalted up on a hill. He’s like a god. He’s up near the heavens, and the commoners and the peasants who want to gaze upon his palace and kingdom, they have to look up, and he looks down on them. There’s a lot of symbolism there. And he had a fortified palace. He had two. He had one for the summer, one for the winter, so he could get good weather year-round. It’s in modern-day Iran. Is God working far away from Jerusalem? Yes, he is.

In addition, we are told, and I am not saying this in a way that is inappropriate, but he is supposed to be a handsome guy. Okay? I don’t know what a handsome guy is, but the record says that he was tall, dark, and handsome. I’m not sure that’s handsome. I tend to think that short and wide is handsome, but the historical record says that he was very handsome, like, a very good-looking guy. Okay? So, whatever your picture, ladies, is of a really good-looking guy, that was Xerxes.

Now, can you imagine that women were really interested in him? Most powerful, richest man on the earth who says he’s god, has a palace and a backup palace, he mistreated and abused women, and he took the position that God had assigned to him and he used it for evil.

The Soldiers

He also was well protected. You ever heard of the Immortals? You ever heard of the Immortals? Or there was the television show, *Deadliest Warrior*, where they’ll get various fighting styles from history and have them duke it out and see which one is the toughest. One of their episodes, they had the Immortals against the Celts, and of course the Celts lost. We all saw that coming. Any time you’re up against the Immortals, you’re going to lose. Right? Like, if a guy shows up for a fight: “What group are you with?” “I’m with the Immortals.” “Well, I should just go home. You can’t die. That means I can’t win.”

And that was their perspective, that these soldiers, these warriors, this personal bodyguard division for Xerxes, they thought that these guys were invincible. And there were ten thousand of them, called the Immortals, and this was his security staff. Okay? So, his security staff fills a small stadium, and they would travel with him wherever he went, and they were glad to die for him, and they would defend him, and they would go to war with him, and they would protect him. And again, I’m not recommending it, but they also make an appearance in the film, *300*. They’re the guys with the masks.

He also had two thousand horsemen who followed him and two thousand lancers. I mean, that’s quite a posse. Right? Like, we get impressed, we’re like, “Oh, there’s a rapper. He’s got a full limo. Oh, and that guy’s got a stadium. That’s a posse.” All of these soldiers surrounding him, and it talks about him sitting on his royal throne.

The Throne

Now, let me tell you about his throne. His throne symbolized everything that he valued. The throne was beautiful, it was enormous, it was glorious, and the picture of him seated, high and exalted, upon a throne, is a godlike portrait. It shows him in all majesty and all glory. It shows him ruling and reigning like a god.

He loved his throne so much that when his army would go into battle—and he an army of perhaps a few million soldiers. He also could be a tyrant, and dictate and dominate through destruction. And as his army would march off into battle, he would have his throne carried to the battle, and he would sit on it surrounded by the Immortals, and they would carry him off to war. And he would sit up on a high point and watch his military defeat his foes while seated on his throne.

If you or I were to sit on his throne, death was the penalty. If you or I were to step on the rug in front of his throne, death was the penalty. When we pass before him or just his throne, we were to bow down in homage, and worship, adoration, humility to the great King Xerxes, the king of kings. He was a god. He was worshiped as a god.

THE PARTY TO END ALL PARTIES

So, what’s he going to do with all this money? What’s he going to do with all this power and all this fame? Is he going to care for widows, orphans, and those in need? Is he going to look after young girls who could be abused in a very difficult day? Is he going to make sure all those kids who don’t have a dad are cared for? No. No.

Here’s what he does. The end of verse 3: “He gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him.” He threw parties, huge parties.

What’s the biggest party you’ve ever been to? Was it a wedding, wedding reception, fiftieth wedding anniversary? He threw huge parties. Now, one thing, as you study Esther—please study it on your own—there are between eight and ten banquets or feasts scattered throughout the book. The commentators debate, but those are scenes at which significant things happen. The storyline transitions at these banquets and feasts. So, here is the first of many.

And the way it would work is this: you might wonder, how does he maintain his rule over his kingdom? How does he keep everybody in line? Well, it’s easy. You get all the military and political leaders, you invite them to your palace, and you feed them the best food, and you give them the best drink, and you hand to them the most beautiful harem, and you give

them lavish gifts of gold and silver, and they will do anything for you because you care for them. These are tax dollars at work.

This was a party to end all parties. The commentators say, just his military generals, and his leaders, and the rulers, fifteen thousand people. Okay? Those of you who are event planners, hospitality folks, start thinking about fifteen thousand people. Transportation, housing, rooms, security. They're all very important. Food, drink, flowers, place settings, entertainment, bands, harem, girls, teenagers. All of it organized. How much does it cost? It's free. It's all from the great King Xerxes.

Now, how many of us, we hear that, we say, "That's nasty. That's just nasty with a side of nasty and nasty for dessert." Okay? That's just nasty. Just a drunk old man, ruling, reigning, abusing girls, spending money, feasting, drinking. How many of us, our frustration is really rooted in jealousy?

If we gave you an unlimited amount of power and wealth, what would you do? Some of you are like, "I would feed the poor." You would throw a party. You would throw a party. You would throw a party and you would invite lots of important people so they could all take their photo with you, and you could put it on Facebook and Twitter. "Here I am with Puff Daddy, and Puff Mommy, and Puff Baby. I'm all puffed up. It's amazing. Here I am. I got rims on my chariot. We're rolling high society. It's a big deal. Here I am with musicians, and political leaders, and heroes, and all the people that you see on television or you read about in the tabloids. All the people that we want to get to know and we wish we were like, oh, they're all at my house and they all come because I called them, and they all want to hang out with me because they all know that I'm in charge."

It's why we watch certain shows, we follow certain stars, we care about certain tabloids. What are they doing? And really what it is, it's jealousy. And here, the curtain gets pulled back and we get a portrait of what it looks like to live at the highest levels in the history of the world in the days of the kings of Persia.

How long do you think this party lasted? This is crazy. "While he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days." How many days, Mars Hill? "180 days." That's a party! How many of you are like, "Yeah, I partied one time for six months! I don't remember it, but I hear it was amazing." Alright? Six months!

First of all, that definitely means it's a time of peace. If all the political leaders and military leaders are like, "We're gonna go drink for six months and then come back," you know that this kingdom is really running well. Okay?

In addition, do the math with me. Start to think about it. Six-month party for fifteen thousand people. How many of you have recently just had a dinner party where you cooked for some people, and then you went to bed for a month you were so tired? Right? Like, Thanksgiving, Christmas, exhausted. Six months. Six months!

Now, how many of you really are like, "That sounds good. Pastor Mark, don't say it like it's bad. Like, you know, a six-month vacation? Like, a hammock and a drink with, you know, an umbrella in it, and yeah. Praise the Lord. It's in the Bible, why don't—yeah, let's do that. You know? Like, that's a—"? How many of you right now, you're like, "Six-month vacation, unlimited food and drink." This is like an all-inclusive resort. It's unbelievable.

Why? Why does he do this? Because he loves people, because he's nice, because he's generous? No. "He showed the riches of his royal—" what? "Glory." There's a worship word. Here's what it's all about: "Everyone, come see the glory of the king. He's high, and exalted, and seated on a throne." Sound familiar? "We're going to gather people around him from all the nations that he rules. We're going to eat, and we're going to drink, and we're going to sing, and were going to play. And one after the other, we're going to spend six months toasting the great King Xerxes while he sits on his throne and receives glory, and honor, and praise, and he's worshiped as a god." It's all about his glory.

Mars Hill Church, we believe that the glory is for another king. Amen? Another king who seats himself upon a throne, and he rules and reigns over nations, kings, kingdoms. This man wants to be Jesus. This man thinks he's Jesus.

Now, how many of us, really, given the same resources, we would make the same decisions? How many of us, really, when it comes to our wealth, it's about us showing our glory. So, the car we drive is so that everybody's, "Wow, did you see that? That's nice. Where'd you get that? How'd you afford—that's amazing." We can sit in a nice bucket seat with a seat warmer. That's our throne.

We go home to our house and we want to have the greatest house so we can show the world, "Here's our glory. Look at what we've done." Walk into your house, almost every house has got one chair, right, that's your chair. "No one sit in the chair! That's my chair." I'm just quoting your father. Right? 'Cause that's his throne, and this is his kingdom, and you're all his subjects, and the king is now in glory.

There's something in us that wants to be king. There's something in us that wants all the glory. The difference between you, and me, and him is the wealth, opulence, and resources that are at our availability. But the clothes we wear, look at how glorious they are! How we present ourselves, look at how glorious they are! This was all about the king being exalted in glory, a mere man acting like the God-man.

The story continues. Verse 5: "And when these days were completed," six months of partying. Let me just say this: do you know what it looks like—can you even conceive what it looks like, six months, all expenses paid, free harem, open bar, all-you-can-eat buffet, no rules. Where, like, Charlie Sheen's over in the corner shaking his head like, "This is too much. This is out of control. This is too much." Right? He's just like, "This is crazy. "I can't handle—I can't stomach this. It's out of control." Right? It's insanity. This is Mardi Gras meets frat party meets, you know, open bar meets happy hour insanity.

How many of you—maybe don't raise your hand, but how many of you, you've kind of tried this life? You're like, "I woke up wearing a lampshade in another state two months later. You know? I've tried that." Okay? That's what's going on. How many of you deep down, you're like, "I still think that might be fun." Right? Some of you are not getting the big idea. This is bad! This is really, really, really bad. Okay?

And here it goes: "And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace." So, six months, the fifteen thousand political and military rulers get an enormous party, and then he opens it up to all the "regular folk," the poor people, the peasants, and there were very rich and very poor in that day. So, now more the normal citizens, they get a one-week party.

So, Xerxes says, first of all, "You get a week off work. It's a national holiday." Yay King Xerxes! "And I'm going to open the palace!" Good! How many of you have been, for example, through somewhere like Europe or Turkey and you get to go into a palace. "Ooh, there's the throne!" You get to see it. "There are the jewels! Oh, there's the dining room. Oh,

there's the bedroom. Oh, you know, there's the guest quarters." And oh, you get to see the majesty of the king and his kingdom. That's all this is.

This is an opportunity for the poor peasants, and the simple workers, and the commoners, and those who are illiterate, "Oh yes, we get to get a tour, a free tour of the king's palace. We get to see our king in all his glory. We get to see all that is his kingdom," and they parade through. Kind of like us going to the mall, right? "Oh, look at that! Wow! That's amazing! Oh, I wish I could have that. I wish I could afford that." And his place is nice. His place makes Restoration Hardware look like camping. This place is unbelievable.

Let's read of it. "There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen." So, it says—they give some of the decor. Some of you are interior designers, event planners, you like hospitality, you're cooks. You get an idea of the magnificence of this event. I don't know how many people are here at this point. There's, let's say, fifteen thousand plus everybody—maybe there are fifty thousand people. You even get an idea of how big this party is?

And it tells us some of the colors are purple, and the reason it tells us that the colors are purple, purple was the most expensive, most difficult, most rare color in that day. It was the hardest to obtain purple dye, so it was only for the most affluent and wealthy. That's why in the New Testament, it tells us that this gal, Lydia, became a Christian and she gave to help Paul's ministry, tells us that she was a dealer in purple garments. She was very rich.

So, like in our day, somebody walks by, you're like, "Wow!" You see the—that's why we put labels on our clothes, right? "Oh, that was expensive. How did they afford that?" Well, in that day, you didn't necessarily need a label on your clothes, you just needed to wear purple and everybody knew. Wow, purple. Only a select few can afford that.

Now, here's what they do with these colors. What do they do? "Purple to silver rods." The curtains are purple. The curtains are purple. Now, is this a big palace or a small palace? Big palace. A lot of curtains or a few curtains? A lot of curtains. You're a poor commoner. Down where you live, nobody owns purple. They've never seen purple. They've heard about it. "There's this thing called purple." "Really, what's it like?" "It's kind of like blue married red and they had purple." "I've never seen that!" Then you walk into the palace and all the curtains are purple. Wow.

Not only that, silver rods. How many of you, when you hang your curtains, you hang them on silver rods? Do you do that at your apartment? Like, what are the curtains— "Well, you know, I need to hold the curtains up and I had leftover silver, just mountains of silver, and I thought, 'Well, curtain rods, that's a good use for silver.'" Tax dollars at work.

"And marble pillars." How many of you have a marble pillar in your dorm, your condo? You're like, "Yes, the ceiling is up, the floor is down. We needed something to keep them separated. I chose marble pillars." This is magnificent wealth, even to this day.

"And also couches of gold and silver." This one's just crazy. You're walking through, you're like, "That's a nice couch." "Gold. Gold." "The whole couch?" "Yes." "How many seats do you have?" "Well, we have seating for, I don't know, fifty thousand. And all the couches are gold. And then, you know, we went to the flea market and we got some silver ones too."

Can you even see this? Meanwhile, down the hill, there are poor people that are hunting, and fishing, and farming, trying to eke out a living to feed their families. But oh, there's the great King Xerxes. He sits on a gold couch. His curtains are purple. They're held up with silver.

"Mother-of-pearl and precious stones." It includes one here, "Pavement made of porphyry." This is a purple quartz. He's now got fine jewels for the floor. Can you imagine that? You're walking like, "This is amazing." You look down, you're like, "What the? What the heck? It's all fine jewels in the floor."

The story continues: "Mother-of-pearl." How many of you ladies, right now, would like to have anything mother-of-pearl? Anything. Mother-of-pearl is mentioned, and precious stones. He just says, "Et cetera." That's how over the top it is. It's just overwhelming, it's awe-inspiring, it's heaven-like. It's so majestic.

How many of you were wondering, "Well, what's on the menu? What did they eat? What did they drink?" "Drinks were served in," what? "Gold vessels." I mean, the thing is getting crazy. You walk in, you're like, "Hello, welcome to the king's party." "Thank you." "Here's your gold vessel." "What's that for?" "Drinking." "Really?" How many of you don't have gold glasses in your cupboard at home? Pure gold. You know you have a lot of gold when they're like, "What do you want do with all the gold? There's so much gold, this whole mountain." "I don't know, place settings?"

So, the guests come in, they're handed a gold goblet. This is more money than they will earn in their lifetime. "Oh, it's for drinking." Now, you start thinking about it, those of you who are event planners and watch the Food Network. Start thinking about it. If you have fifty thousand guests, how many place settings do you need? I don't know. A lot. Can you imagine the busboys walking around with tubs full of gold goblets and the guy at the dishwasher's in the back like, "Gold, gold, gold, gold, gold, gold," just cleaning all the dishes.

The story continues. What did they put in the golden vessels? It says, "Vessels of different kinds," as well. In case you didn't like gold, you could go with, I don't know, some precious stone, or you could go with something that was hand-carved, or maybe a metal, or something that was just hand-forged out of silver. After all, if gold is not what you're seeking, we have options for you.

"And the royal wine." Friends, there are two kinds of wine: wine and royal wine. Right? Everything from, "Hey, it came in a box," to "Hey, it came in a bottle," that's wine. Royal wine? Now, imagine this: fifteen thousand people have had an open bar for six months. You ever seen somebody at an open bar?

Okay, if you're thinking of getting married some day and you're like, "I don't know if we should do an open bar," don't! Don't. Just don't. Right? Everybody gets drunk, they start breaking commandments, the bride is crying. Right? The groomsmen are fighting. Like, it all just—everybody goes three people back on the evolutionary chart when you have an open bar, right? You're like sloped foreheads, grunting, hitting each other. It's horrible. Okay? So don't do an open bar at your wedding reception, amen? How many of you have done that? You're like, "We did an open bar. Yeah, that was not good. That was not good. Yeah. We still can't find a cousin. We just miss him." All right?

Open bar for six months. Not just wine, royal wine. So, you're talking the best wine that could possibly be made, unlimited open bar, and then they open it to the commoners, and the peasants, and the regular folk. Imagine this, okay? Just conceive with me, like, a guy who's a fisherman, a farmer, he's got a week holiday, you know, the king gives him it off. "Hey, Martha, let's go see the palace. A mug, what's this?" "This is all you can drink royal wine." "Yes! How long is this good for?" "A week." Insanity ensues. Insanity ensues. I mean, this guy's house makes Puff Daddy's house look like a tool shed. Okay? And this guy's bar is unprecedented. There's nothing in Vegas that even compares to what is being served and how people are behaving.

“And drinking was according to this edict.” So, they have a drinking rule. How many of you think a drinking rule would be good? Yes, that’s a good idea, a drinking rule. Here’s the drinking rule: “There is no compulsion.” Okay, here’s the drinking rule: there are no rules! There was a rule in that day, when the king drank you would have to drink, but the king said, “You can drink whatever you want, you can drink as much as you want, you can drink whenever you want. No rules.” Imagine telling fifty thousand people that they had a week to drink and do without limitation. This is the emergency brake pulled on the sinful condition of mankind.

How many of you, really, have had days like this? Maybe not seven in a row or 180 in a row, but you’ve had days like this. No limitations, no inhibitions, no restrictions, just full-throated sin, go for it, drunkenness, gluttony, perversion, debauchery, overindulgence. See, and what can happen is we look and we can sort of get religious. “Wow, those are nasty people. That’s very terrible. I just feel like I need hand sanitizer to even read this story, the things are so nasty.” But then some of us, if we were honest, we would say, “Been there, done that. I understand. I understand how sinful people can be, and when given opportunity, they tend to prefer the opportunity for evil.”

“The king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.” How many of you ladies are wondering, where are the ladies? Like, where are the gals? How many of you gals would not want to be at this party? Okay, all of you would not want to be at this party, especially the one that was military personnel for six months, fifteen thousand men, drunk. Okay? All the commandments are broken. There’s nothing good happening.

It was customary in that day for the husbands and wives to dine together. It wasn’t like it is today in some Muslim cultures where when there’s a public gathering, the men and women, perhaps, are separated. In that day, it was customary for the men and women to, generally speaking, dine together. Not this one.

So, we read in verse 9: “Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus,” King Xerxes. So, all the men are drinking, and feasting, and partying. And there are women there, but what kind of women? The employed women who are part of the harem, and we’ll get into that because that ties in directly to the story of Esther.

Over in another room, another portion of the palace, is Queen Vashti. She’s got all the women. When no women are present and no rules are in place, men become animals. Amen? What they’re doing is despicable, deplorable, disgusting, and depraved, and there are women there, but these are women who are getting used and abused.

And some of you men need to understand that the difference between you and Xerxes—and he was a perverted man. I mean, he married this woman, Vashti. Do you know who she was originally married to? His brother. This is his sister-in-law. He stole her. He thought she was attractive so he stole his brother’s wife and, in addition, he thought that his brother’s daughter was attractive, and so he stole her too, and he married the mother and the daughter, his sister-in-law and his niece.

In addition, he had numerous other wives and he had a harem. Herodotus, the great historian, says that the last fifteen years of his life he hardly tended to matters of state. He was totally consumed with the harem and all the women who just met all of his evil, sick, sinful, selfish, abusive desires.

And let me say this: some of you guys have this same thing on your hard drive. The only difference between you and Xerxes is income. And so what he had in reality, you have digitally. We’ve got to be careful that as we condemn Xerxes, we condemn ourselves.

As we condemn their overindulgence, we condemn our overindulgence. As we condemn their desire for glory—and it’s what we use Facebook and Twitter and social media to do. “Photos of what I’m doing because the whole world needs to see what I am up to because I am important, I am significant, I am central and essential, and there are things that I am doing that are glorious and you need to see them, and you need to praise me, and you need to honor me by posting on my wall.” The times have changed, but the hearts have not. It’s amazing how what we see externally reveals what is going on internally. Amen?

Now at this point, Xerxes, in hearing the story, would feel so proud. “Look at me in all my glory!” But it reveals something of a very wicked, evil, selfish, narcissistic desire to be God, to sit on a throne, to rule over nations, to ravage and abuse women, to indulge in food and drink in excess. Might I say, Mars Hill, he’s just the first American.

WHERE’S GOD?

My question to you is this—think on it for a moment as we’ve read the words of the book of Esther. What’s missing? What’s missing, Mars Hill? Let me ask it another way. Who’s missing? Who’s missing in the story? God. We just read the first nine verses of the great book of Esther, God is not once mentioned, God doesn’t appear.

Some of you say, “Well, what if we keep reading the book?” Read the whole book of Esther, God is never mentioned once. It’s a “godless” book. God never appears. God doesn’t speak. No prophet speaks on God’s behalf. No angel shows up. The heavens don’t open and God delivers a word personally. There are no miracles. There’s nothing supernatural. There’s no mention of Jerusalem, and the temple, and the presence of God. There’s no mention of the priesthood and the sacrificial system for sin. There’s no quoting of other books of the Bible. There’s no giving of God’s laws. No one repents, no one prays. There is no action from God or to God that is revealed anywhere in the entirety of the book of Esther. It’s this stunningly curious omission.

How many of you this sounds like your life? How many of you this sounds like your life? You’re like, “I have never seen a miracle. I’ve read about them, I’ve never seen a miracle. God’s never showed up in that way in my life.” How many of you have never heard from God? You’ve never gotten a dream, a vision, an audible word. You’ve never gotten visited by an angel. You’re sick and you haven’t been healed. You’ve prayed and it’s not been answered. You’ve looked and it’s not been accomplished.

How many of you, that’s your life? It feels like the story of Esther. “Dirty, rich men rule the world, I’m grinding it out, and God doesn’t show up.” And it leads to all kinds of questions. “God, do you even exist or is Xerxes really God? Is this the best we have? God, if you do exist, are you paying any attention at all? Are you just a deistic God? Are you an absentee landlord? Have you been on vacation and do you not care?” Or “God, do you lack the power to do anything? Is your glory not commensurate to the Xerxes of the world? Is your throne not above their throne? Do you not see? Do you not care? Will you not act?” How many of you in your dark, desperate, desolate moments have either uttered that or thought that privately? Let’s be honest.

“Where is he?” Women are being abused, money is being misspent, and mere men think they’re gods. Where’s God? Where’s God in the story of Esther? He’s silhouetted in the book, friends. Any of you seen a silhouette? See, a painting is in great detail. A silhouette paints a portrait through absence. God appears in the story of Esther, but he does so silhouetted. He’s

not there. So it is with a silhouette. When you see it, you can't make anything out, and then all of a sudden, you look at the absence, and it reveals the presence of something that you missed at first glance.

God is silhouetted through the book of Esther, and might I submit this to you, friends: God works in Esther not through his visible hand of miracle, but through his invisible hand of providence. Because, see, we know that history is not circumstance, happenstance, or chance. It's governed by providence, that God is sovereign and good, that God rules and reigns over all peoples, times, and places, that God is in the details of history, that God is working everything out according to a plan for his glory and our good.

And for those of you who have felt like the story of Esther feels, I want you to know that God is at work in your life as well. You may never hear his voice. You may never see his face in this life. The angel may not come. The healing may not occur. The prayer may not be answered. Yes, the voice of God may not thunder down, but God is active, and present, and at work in the lives of his people, even those who are far away from him as they were.

How many of you, in hearing the story of Xerxes, there's a hollowness, there's a shallowness, there's an emptiness. "That's it? That's all we get is one guy who thinks he's a god, and we all worship him, and then he dies, and then some other nation rises up, and he's our new god, and we worship him, and then he dies? Is human history just thousands of years of corrupt, rich, perverted men sitting on thrones being worshiped as God? Is that all there is? Is there no more?" How many are frustrated?

JESUS IS A BETTER KING

Here's the good news: above Xerxes, there's another King. This is not the only book of the Bible. It's part of the storyline that leads to a greater King. Above Xerxes, there's another throne, and seated on it is another King named Jesus. And Jesus is our King, and unlike Xerxes, he got off his throne. He didn't invite us just to come and sit around him. He first came down to dwell among us. Mars Hill, I need you to know that Jesus is a better King.

Here's what Xerxes says about himself from an inscription that the archaeologists uncovered: "I am Xerxes the Great King, the only king, the king of all countries which speak all kinds of languages, the king of this entire big and far-reaching earth." Xerxes thought he was Jesus. Some of you think you're Jesus. Some of you honor, obey, worship, follow, adore people who think they're Jesus. Jesus is a better King. Amen, Mars Hill? Jesus is a better King.

Xerxes was the son of Darius, but Jesus is the Son of God. Xerxes never tasted poverty nor humility, but Jesus tasted both poverty and humility to identify with us. Xerxes used his power to abuse women, but Jesus used his power to honor women. Xerxes spent his entire life being served, but Jesus spent his entire life serving others. Xerxes killed his enemies with an army of millions, but Jesus died for his enemies, saving billions.

Xerxes sat on a throne in Susa, but Jesus sits on a throne in heaven. Xerxes was the most powerful man on earth, but Jesus made the heavens and the earth and he rules over all creation. Xerxes said he would rule wherever the sun set, but only Jesus made the sun and rules over all of creation.

Xerxes died and today, no one worships Xerxes as god; but Jesus conquered death and today, billions worship Jesus as the only God. Xerxes thought he was a man who became god, but only Jesus is God who became a man. Xerxes' kingdom had subjects from many nations, but Jesus' kingdom has joyful worshipers from every nation. Xerxes threw enormous banquets, but the one Jesus is preparing for us makes his pale in comparison. Xerxes' kingdom came to an end, but Jesus' kingdom has no end. Xerxes declared himself king of kings, but he died. He stood before and was judged by the one and only King of kings, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Mars Hill Church, today is our day of celebration. We are citizens of a greater kingdom. We have received a greater gift. We are looking forward to a greater blessing, and we gather in the name, and the presence, and the fame of Jesus Christ. He is our great King. He is a better King than any king and every king. He is the King of kings, and so now, we will celebrate Jesus Christ. And if they were willing to throw lavish, extravagant, fun, joyful parties for a demonic, false king, how much more should we rejoice and be glad that our King knows us, that our King loves us, that our King saves us, that our King seeks us, that our King serves us, and our King is preparing a banquet for us. Amen?

Father God, I pray for our church. I pray that we would know that you are good, that you are sovereign, that though we don't always see it, you are always, according to your invisible hand of providence, at work in our lives. God, at this point in the story, there is no hope, there is no joy. So it is in our life until we meet the Lord Jesus, the greater King, the greatest King, the only King, the King of kings. Lord Jesus, we see you now, high and exalted. We see you seated on your throne, ruling and reigning over all languages, all nations, all cultures, all peoples, all times, all places. You alone are worthy of glory. Every party that's ever been thrown, every celebration that's ever been enacted, every time people have gathered seeking to honor someone, it was a faint, hollow, shallow echo of what we were made for: worship; that you are a glorious God, Lord Jesus, and we look forward to the day when our faith becomes sight, when we rise from death as you did and we walk into your kingdom together as your people. We see you seated upon the throne, we sit down at the table that you have prepared for us, and we honor, and celebrate, and glorify you forever. Don't let us settle for lesser kings and kingdoms. Keep us hungry and strong until we see the Lord Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.