

**CALVARY PANDAN BIBLE-
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

[Adapted from Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church,
10 Downing St. Oakleigh, Vic., 3166]

DHW BIBLE CLASS

LESSON 1

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The book of Esther is another one of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament that is inspired by God and is therefore infallible, inerrant, completely reliable and trustworthy. Although the name of God is not mentioned even once in the ten chapters of the book, it is not a legitimate basis for rejecting its canonicity.¹ Many political leaders and nations in the world do not mention God or even reject Him, but that does not change the fact that He exists and He is very much involved in the affairs of men (Isaiah 45:15)². So in the book of Esther,

¹ The phrase "the canon of Holy Scriptures" is an expression designating the divine origin of each of the sixty-two books of the Bible. God only canonized the sixty-six books of Holy Scriptures, and men "simply recognized what had already long since been canonized by God through the inspiration of the the original text." Further reading: R. Laird Harris, *Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969), p.155; and R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), pp.277-279.

² Isaiah 45:15 Verily thou *art* a God that hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Saviour.

in every turn of events, the unseen hand of God was working out the purpose and plan of His will.

The inspired divine writer of the book is the Holy Spirit. The human writer cannot be certain. Some have suggested Mordecai. Others think that the writer was a Persian Jew who had returned to Judaea, and wished to commemorate the celebration of Purim with the children of Israel to remember God's deliverance. Whatever the case may be, the identity of the human writer is not as important as the fact that God inspired for His people this wonderful book of Esther. Through this book, we can understand why the Israelites celebrate annually the Festival of Purim (February-March). Besides explaining the origin of Purim, the most instructive teaching of Esther is that of the providence of God working sovereignly over nations and individuals. A prayerful and careful study of the book should bring comfort and joy, increase confidence and courage, and change our small view of God into awesome amazement.

The events in the book, unlike all the other books of the Old Testament, happened in Persia. It took place during the period when the Medes and the Persians were the joint masters of the world under Cyrus the Great who toppled the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C. and established the Medo-Persian Empire which became the largest in the world.

After him, Cambyses, his son, succeeded him (530-522 B.C.), followed by his son Darius I, who ruled the empire from 522-486 B.C. Darius I continued the policy of his grandfather Cyrus the Great by allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple. For this reason, he was warmly mentioned by the Jews (Ezra 4-6). After his death, his son Ahasuerus (Xerxes, 486-465 B.C.) became the king of the Persian Empire. His military expedition against Greece (480-479) ended in a dismal failure. He was killed in a conspiracy in 465 B.C.³ The events in Esther took place during the period of Xerxes' reign.

The following is an outline of chapter one:

1. The Seemingly Inconsequential Banquet (1:1-9)
2. Reason for a New Queen (1:10-12)
3. The Exile of the Queen (1:13-20)
4. Man is Head of his House (1:21-22).

COMMENTARY

The Seemingly Inconsequential Banquet – 1:1-9

The opening phrase, “now it came to pass” is very significant for it clearly means that the things written in the book were actual with real people, places and events. This revelation and declaration is

³ He was succeeded by his son, Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.).

enough to invalidate all arguments against the historicity of the records of this book. King Ahasuerus began his reign over the vast Medo-Persian empire stretching from India in the east to Ethiopia in the west comprising a total of 127 provinces. This opening statement establishes the identity of Ahasuerus.⁴ King Ahasuerus had a number of palaces, one was in Persepolis, his summer stronghold, and the other was in Shushan (Greek, Susa), his winter palace which was a beautiful city. It was in Shushan that the events recorded in Esther occurred. Archaeologists discovered an ancient inscription in the royal palace of Persepolis which not only shows the extent of Ahasuerus' kingdom, but also his arrogance. He said of himself: *I am Xerxes, the great king, the only king, the king of [all] countries [which speak] all kind of languages, the king of this [entire] big and far-reaching earth—the son of King Darius, the Achaemenian, a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan of Aryan descent.*⁵

In the third year of his reign (483 B.C.), Ahasuerus threw a banquet (literally, a drinking feast) inviting all his “princes and servants” to gather in his magnificent and beautiful palace in Shushan. The purpose of this feast is not explained. Many Bible scholars think that

⁴ He should not be confused with Ahasuerus of Daniel 9:1.

⁵ Derek Prime, *Unspoken lessons about the unseen God*, Welwyn Commentaries (Darlington Evangelical Press), p.25.

one of the reasons he called them was to discuss with them the plans for the invasion of Greece, which was launched in the beginning of 481 B.C. (about two years later). This could explain the long duration of the banquet which lasted 180 days. At the same time, Ahasuerus wanted to impress all his guests, the “nobles and princes of the provinces,” by displaying the power, riches and glory of his kingdom—the Medo-Persian Empire.

After this one-hundred-eighty-day banquet, he gave another drinking feast to his nobles, officials and servants, who served him in the palace of Shushan. This banquet was held in the open-air garden grounds of the royal palace, and it lasted for only seven days. The divine writer spared no effort in describing the splendour, beauty and opulence of the palace court in great detail (vv. 6, 7). Customarily “the drinking was according to the law” (v.8) meaning that the king would limit the consumption of wine. But in this instance, no one was forced to keep the law, instead, the king gave them the freedom to drink as much as they desired to their hearts’ content and enjoyment. One can only imagine the drunk stupor that pervaded the place and the immoral acts and sexual orgies that usually accompany drunkards.

In the meantime, Queen Vashti also hosted a banquet for the womenfolk in the royal palace. Why she held a feast at the same time as the king is suspiciously forboding. It was held inside the royal house which belonged to King

Ahasuerus was how the Bible put it in verse 9. It was like a challenge to the king.

Reason for a New Queen – 1:10-12

Culturally, Ahasuerus should have brought Vashti with him to the feast. Again no explanation was given for her absence. Nevertheless, Vashti exercised her liberty to have a feast for the womenfolk in the royal palace. On the seventh day of the second banquet hosted by King Ahasuerus, his heart was “merry with wine” (high on alcohol). With that kind of stimulation, Ahasuerus ordered his seven closest eunuchs, namely, Memucan, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas, to fetch Queen Vashti, who was a very beautiful lady. The king wanted Vashti to parade and to show off herself wearing the royal crown before him, the princes and people (all males) in the banquet. King Ahasuerus probably considered her the crowning glory of all his possessions. He wanted to show off that he had the most beautiful woman in the land. She was to him something of a prized catch.

The ancient Jewish rabbi intimated that Ahasuerus’ proposition was for Vashti to parade unveiled (naked), wearing only her royal crown (v.11a). But this is extra biblical interpretation. There is no record of this at all. In his drunken state, Ahasuerus wanted to show off his wife before his drunken friends. As king and husband to Vashti, Ahasuerus had failed in his responsibility and duty to protect

and honour her by his action, even for a heathen king.

Vashti flatly and firmly refused to yield to the king's command. This was a brave response. She was morally right in her stand. It was difficult for her to arrive at that decision. The consequences of disobeying the king's command was serious. For one thing, she might be executed. If she was not executed, she might be humiliated or demoted. She must have thought through the grave consequences of her uncompromising action. It would be a costly price to pay to keep her dignity and integrity. When Ahasuerus was told of Vashti's decision not to appear at the banquet, he was furious. He was snubbed by his queen in the presence of his servants in the royal palace. His inflated kingly pride was deeply wounded.

The Exile of the Queen – 1:13-20

In his anger, Ahasuerus' natural reaction was to deal severely against Vashti. He consulted his "wise men" or counsellors who "knew about the times"—men who read the signs of the stars: magi or astrologers. In addition, they were also experts in the laws and traditions of Persia. Their names were: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, who were also princes of Persia and Media, and had direct access to the king. They were probably the seven counsellors

mentioned in Ezra 7:14.⁶ Ahasuerus asked his "wisemen": *What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to law, because she had not performed the commandment of the king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?* According to kingly custom, Ahasuerus wanted the matter to be dealt with according to the law.

Vashti was in breach of the law by her refusal to obey the king. Whether the commandment was right or wrong is not the issue. The king's commandment must be carried out without question.

Memucan answered the king. He seemed to be the main spokesman on behalf of the other six counsellors. This Memucan should not be confused with the Memucan who is mentioned in verse ten; the former was a prince and counsellor who had direct access to the king whereas the latter was merely a eunuch associated with keeping the king's harem.

Memucan, the wise counsellor went straight to the point without wasting a lot of words. He began by presenting the problem that the wrong done by Vashti the queen was not to the king only but to all the princes and people of the entire empire. Then he concluded by giving a solution as to how the problem could be resolved. He proposed to the king that a royal commandment be issued by the king, and let this law be included in

⁶ Ezra 7:14 Forasmuch as thou art sent of the king, and of his seven counsellors, to enquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem, according to the law of thy God which *is* in thine hand;

the laws of the Persians and Medes that Vashti (note title omitted) should make no appearance before the king. The king should give her royal position to another who would be better than she in every way — beauty, intelligence and submissiveness. (vv.16-19). Memucan did not propose Vashti's execution but that since she refused to come before the king when summoned, she might as well forget about coming to the king again in future.

Man is Head of His House – 1:21-22

Memucan's explanation and the solution to the problem pleased King Ahasuerus. The king ordered that Memucan's advice be carried out. The law makers were told to write the law which was to be written in the languages of all the provinces and the people. Generally, the official languages were Persian, Elamite, Babyloanian and Aramiac.⁷ The wirtten document was sent by express mail. The Persians had developed a highly efficient way of sending mails through a relay of ponies and camels throughout the empire. Medo-Persian law once enacted and ratified was irrecovocable, even the king could not revoke it.

PRACTICAL VALUE

The study of Esther 1, if it is not followed by a purpose of heart to discover

the knowledge of God and His will, will be merely an academic exercise. The knowledge of God and His will should motivate us to change our beliefs and behaviour to please and glorify God and love our neighbours.

One of the lessons we learn in this chapter concerns the consumption of alcohol. King Ahasuerus allowed a free flow of wine for all his guests. He himself was drunk as evidenced by his foolish order to Queen Vashti, his wife, to parade before his rowdy and drunken guests. Alcohol is a drug which is capable of inflating one's so-called self-confidence. How many families have been broken because of alcoholism! The Word of God warns against drunkenness (Proverbs 20:1): *Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise.* The best way to avoid drunkenness is not to drink alcohol at all. The biblical position on alcohol is total abstinence.

The silent hand of God was in all these political intrigues. King Ahasuerus and Vashti including all the chamberlains and counselors were fulfilling God's sovereign plan without realization. Each and every one of them will be held accountable for their respective actions, whether good or evil. Yet behind it all, God was preparing the scenario and the right people placed in right places to accomplish the salvation of Israel. Through it, the spiritual plan of God to save the world from sin in the coming of the Messiah will not be thwarted. Years

⁷ Howard Vos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, p.152.

from now, something dastard nearly resulted in the annihilation of the whole nation of Israel through the evil one. But for this simple and apparently innocuous incident in chapter 1, God will deliver Israel and God will be honored through it all and mankind saved.

Esther 1 does not mention the name of God. God's name is not found in this chapter but that does not mean that He was not seeing and working. The fact of the matter is that God was working through the foolishness of Ahasuerus, the reaction of Vashti, and the fear of self-seeking officials. This is a comforting and encouraging truth that God is powerful and wise to work out His plan and purpose to the glory of His Name in order to bless His children. However, we must not expect that just because we are right with God, we will be exempt from all troubles and hardships. God will give us grace when we take our stand in the face of possible difficulties and danger. AMEN

DAILY READINGS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Daily Readings

MONDAY: Esther 1:1-12; Psalm 49:20. Ephesians 5:22-24.

TUESDAY: Esther 1:13-22; Proverbs 16:18.

WEDNESDAY: Esther 1:1-22;

THURSDAY: Esther 1:1-22;

FRIDAY: Esther 1:1-22.

Discussion Questions

- 1. What are your thoughts about the king giving such an extravagant banquet (vv. 3-8)?

- 2. In your opinion how was the second feast different from the first (vv. 3-8)?

- 3. What order from the king did Queen Vashti refuse to honour? What factors would she be weighing in making her decision (v. 9)?

4. Was Vashti's refusal to appear before his guests an act of great courage or great rebellion (vv. 9-12)?

5. What can you say about Vashti for standing up against the most powerful man in the land (vv. 9-12)?

6. How did Ahasuerus treat Queen Vashti (vv.9-22)?

7. Should housewives emulate Vashti's example by refusing to submit to her husband king? Why and why not (vv. 9-20)?

8. What advice did Memucan, the chief counsellor of the king's wise men, give to the king (vv. 16-20)?

9. What was the basis of Memucan's advice to the king? Is it good advice (vv. 16-20)?

12. Which clause in this chapter indicates the sovereignty of God in providing the way to fulfil His design for His people?

10. What did the king do in response to Memucan's suggestion (vv. 21-22)?

13. What can we learn of the characters of Ahasuerus, Vashti, Memucan as seen in this chapter?

11. Did the king's counsellor over-react about the queen's disobedience?

14. This incident will have its real impact that the king and his counsellors did not know. What about the incidents in our own lives? How should we respond to the trials and adversities of life?

15. What can we learn from Xerxes' priorities in life? What did he value most?
