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ESTHER 1

Esther Series

[PRAYER] Lord, as we come into this new book today, we ask that you would give us some instruction and guidance. We open your word expectantly, recognizing you speak to us. We're asking for your *rhema* word today to touch us in our hearts. In Jesus' name, amen.

We're entering a new book of the Bible, the book of Esther. You can open it up in your Bible to the book of Esther because as we are going to go through we're going to go through it verse by verse. Today is chapter 1. This is the handout I'm going to be referring to. You should have the handout today. It's got this timeline on it and stuff.

The book of Esther is a book that takes place here. Now I want you to see this. You can't really see, but we're in this last little bump where it's the post-exile period. You see that at the very end? And you see Esther. In fact, all of the Old Testament books of the Bible are on this timeline for you. This is a great way to look at the whole Old Testament and see where it fits in historically. That's why I wanted to get this timeline to you so you could take a look at it.

I just want to take you from the place where Israel's history is and you see where the conquest is. They come into the land there and then they go into this period of time where they're in the land and then they have the kings. That's the monarchy there, the division of the kingdom, the fall of the northern kingdom, the fall of the southern kingdom. Because they didn't stick with the Lord. They didn't do what God wanted them to do. And because they didn't do what God wanted them to do, God brought the Assyrians first and then the Babylonians in to conquer them and they were taken away to exile. Seventy years from 586 on they were in the Babylonian exile. That's where they are in the bump right before the place where Esther is.

After they were taken away it was time for them to come back, so under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra and Nehemiah they come back and rebuild the walls. They rebuild the city, they rebuild the temple, and God helps them to reestablish the nation in Israel. It's a beautiful thing that takes place. But some of the people remained back in Persia in Babylon in that area. They didn't return with everyone else. So a lot of them were taken out and some of them stayed there. Esther is one of those. Esther was raised by her uncle Mordecai.

There are five characters in the story in the book of Esther. The first character is Xerxes or Ahasuerus, then Vashti. Those are the two we're going to look at today. Then there are three characters that we're not going to look at today, but they're the main characters as we go forward. One is Esther (the book is named after her), her uncle Mordecai, and Haman who is the villain in the story. We'll learn more about him. It's a book about God's providence.

Let's jump in verse 1. Esther 1:1: *This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush.*

Xerxes is a king that is a rather intense guy, self-focused. He seems to be the kind of selfish guy that sits on the throne that you might imagine even in a character. Xerxes is our king. Now Darius was a former king and the Bible tells us in the book of Daniel that Darius reigned over 120 provinces. Same empire here turned over to the Medes and Persians. We're in the Persian Empire and now Xerxes is in charge of 127 provinces. So we've expanded a bit here.

We're in a period of time, we learn from history, that Xerxes is about to go and attack Greece because there's already been this tremendous failure. They've got this huge empire and they go to attack Greece and they fail. Xerxes, after this story here, this next year he's going to attack Greece.

The story in chapter 1 is all about a big party that he throws to try to get all of the nobles and the commanders, everybody together on his side because they're about to go to battle again. That's what the backdrop of the story is in this particular area. He's going to throw this six month party.

Look at verse 2. *At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty.*

If we're going to look at a map, here's the map of the kingdom itself (and you have this on your sheet as well), but you've got all the way up to and not including India and then way over to Kush. Kush is Nigeria, so all the way down almost to Nigeria and then you see it goes almost all the way over there to Greece. He's going to try to go over to Greece, but he's stuck right here and he's getting everybody together.

This is like the world's fair of Persia where he pulls everybody together and throws this big party for 180 days so that they can experience all of the *display, glory, and wealth, and splendor of his majesty*. That's what it says in verse 4.

Verse 5 says, *When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king's palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa.*

Let me go back to that map. Susa is where Persepolis is. Right around that area. It's 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. That's where this winter capitol is of Susa. Beautiful. And we're going to see some of the beautiful description of what's happening.

But what he does at the end of the 180 days is he has a seven day feast that's not just for the nobles and the executives and the commanders, but it's for everybody. Everybody can come to this party.

Notice the description of the garden party because this is where all the men are. Just imagine what this is like; the beauty of this. Verse 6: *The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones.*

We're talking about this beautiful mosaic floor, gold and silver couches. It doesn't seem to me to be very comfortable. But beautiful nonetheless. Gold and silver couches. Then you have this beautiful drapery all around the garden. This was a magnificent place. It was something that when you look at it you go, "Wow." You don't even want to touch anything.

When I was a boy, just a young boy, four, five, six years old, we had a room in our house. It was officially called the lanai. It had a glass door and when you looked through the glass door you could see (because I could not go in there) there was a glass table and there was a white rug with long hair on this rug. The white rug is I'm sure why they wouldn't let me as a preschooler into that room. And then there was all this other stuff in that room that was so beautiful. My father called it the "never never room" because we never never could go in there. That's how I learned to remember this room. It was so beautiful.

I imagine that's nothing compared to this, what we're experiencing here, this amazing beauty of this garden party where the men would be having this meeting. Women are going to be a different place.

Let's go to verse 7 and learn not just about the setting but the service that was offered. Verse 7: *Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other.* Usually we think of having a matched set, but in this case the craftsman crafted them all in gold, so that's what made them match, but they were all shaped a little differently, they were all a little unique and that's what made them special.

Each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king's liberality. By the king's command each guest was allowed to drink with no restrictions, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.

In the garden you had the men. That's where they were. All of them were hanging out there and this is the description of what's happening in their party. But if you look at verse 9 we're told of what's going on with the women. They're being treated to a special party of their own under the leadership of the queen. Her name is Vashti.

If you're a king and your goal is to muster the forces and build friendships with all the key leaders in the land then it's great to have all the women go in with the queen so she can build relationships with them as well because you know that sometimes the men are won over by the women who say, "You really ought to really do this." So they've got this two-pronged thing going on. The king's working in the garden with all these guys having a great time enjoying the relationships with these key people and then Queen Vashti's caring for all the women inside the palace.

Look at verse 9. *Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes.*

Now is where the story gets interesting.

On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine (that's another way of saying he was drunk), he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him (if you're looking for some names for your children, here's some good ones)—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas—to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.

Let me just read that again. I want you to see what he's doing and why he's doing it. First of all, we know that he's a little high on spirits here, on wine, but he wants to *bring before him Queen Vashti* so all the men could see, *wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at.* You have a bunch of drunken men and then entertainment is going to be the queen coming in so they can all look at her and enjoy how beautiful she looks.

I've got to talk to you men for just a moment. We as men are gifted with the ability to be attracted to a female and God designed it that way so that when we look at a woman we go, "Wow." And the reason God designed it that way is because we're the initiators. We need to be initiated in those relationships. So we've been given this particular gift of being able to see a woman and say, "Wow. We're attracted to that."

The world abuses this whole thing that's inside of a man's heart. It abuses it and so men are even attracted into an addiction of pornography for example by a misuse of this God-given thing that takes place. Or it's being used in advertising. Because what a man says is, "Wow. Look at that beautiful woman. Oh, there's a car next to that. Is that car for sale?" And so we are attracted to advertising through our eyes in order to see a beautiful woman. It's something that God designed inside of us, but it can be misused. We have to be very careful about that.

Let me explain to you what's actually happening inside the human heart because, men, we have to understand this, we have to be ready for this. We don't have to be ashamed or embarrassed about the fact that we're attracted to a woman. We have to be careful how to manage that because we are attracted and then we keep looking and staring and trying to satisfy ourselves with that look. That's where we get into trouble.

Psalm 37:4 talks about desires and the only thing I want you to see out of this verse is where desires exist. Where do they exist? In the heart, right? It says, *Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.* So we know that desires exist inside the human heart, that God placed them there. But we have to realize that those desires can get us into trouble.

In Matthew in the New Testament it says, *where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.* Where you invest your treasure, the things that you value, that's where your heart's going to be. So you want to be very careful where you put your treasure. God designed the human heart with these desires and designed men in a particular way.

Some people think that just because it's coming from the heart it must be good. Because "I'm following my heart." That is a mistake. In fact the Bible says in Proverbs 4:23, *Above all else, guard your heart, because everything you do flows from it.* The Bible tells us in Solomon's life, the end of his life, the wives that he had, all those wives that he had led his heart astray to serve other gods. What that tells me is that our hearts can be led astray. We need to be very careful about allowing our hearts to just run. We don't just "go with your heart." That would be a big mistake.

Men, if you allow your desires to reign then you end up in places where you shouldn't be. You end up looking at things you shouldn't be looking at. You get your heart moving in a direction that creates a problem for you. It's a problem. A spiritual man has the Holy Spirit living inside that empowers him to put a check on those desires. It takes a spiritual man to live in our world today. With women displayed regularly for our attraction we must be careful and we must be able to check our desires. The problem with the desires is that they're insatiable. So if you continue to look at a woman and keep going and going, it's insatiable, it continues, you can't be satisfied.

The desire also has the potential to ruin the relationship between a man and a woman. Men can't enjoy women for who they are because they're just enjoying them for what they look like. It's not satisfying and it messes with God's design.

In fact I would suggest that the world gives three lies to men when it comes to this subject. The first lie is that if you feel an attraction to someone that you're falling in love with them. I think that's a lie. It's not true. In fact, as you know, I tell young people all the time, "You don't fall in love. You fall overboard. You fall downstairs. You fall in a hole. But you plan your love life." Very important. Plan your love life. So the first error that the world says is if you have that urge, if you have that desire, if you have that feeling inside of attraction, you must be falling in love.

The second error that the world makes is that if it's coming from your heart it must be good. The world often says, "Follow your heart, just do whatever your heart says." And when you start doing what your heart says in a man-woman relationship you can get into big trouble. You can find yourself following your heart right into a difficult relationship or right into a painful place in your life. That's a lie. It's wrong. That's not true.

A third lie that the world says if you're in love with someone then you should be in bed with them very quickly in order to prove that love. Another wrong statement, a wrong belief that the world teaches us. We must guard our hearts, we must have a plan for doing things, and this is how we do it.

Men, we must have a grid up. When we have that desire (this could be a woman or it could be anything, any desire that we have in our hearts) come in we must have a grid up that allows us to evaluate is this something that I should be doing right now. The spiritual man has the ability because of the Holy Spirit to say, "Whoa," and look away instead of saying, "Whoa," and move forward. We must be careful as men in this particular kind of area.

Xerxes does not have the Spirit of God inside of him. He's just going with the natural, he's just going with whatever pleases him. This natural desire that he has is I'm going to bring the queen in here and we're all going to feast on her and look at her. That's the whole goal that he has. So he's calling her in.

Just a note. It is not wrong for a man to look at his wife and go, "Wow, I really like her," and to desire her. That's fine because God designed it that way for him to be satisfied with her. The problem he has is that he's bringing her in as a trophy to show to all of the other guys. That's the mistake that he's making. So women, I would just suggest that you want to be in a place with your husband (if you've got a husband) that you're allowing him to enjoy you.

Let's go on here because now the problem gets pretty difficult as you see in verse 12. *But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.*

I can imagine the story went something like this: "Hey guys, we've got some great entertainment tonight. I'm going to have my wife, the queen, come out and you're going to not believe that she is fantastic looking. We're just going to bring her out and look at her. That's what we're going to do. That's the attraction for tonight." They didn't have movies in those days, so they're going to bring this woman out. "We're all just going to look at her. This is going to be amazing. You're going to love it."

A few minutes later he has to stand up and say, "I'm sorry, guys. Our main attraction isn't coming. We have a problem here." And then you can imagine they're all saying, "Well I don't know. If this guy can't manage his wife, should we go into battle with him and fight Greece? What are we going to do here?" It creates this problem that they've got to address together and see what they're going to do. Because the queen says no. She says, "I'm not going to be used as a sex object."

Let's talk to the ladies for a moment. Ladies and young ladies, as you choose the things you wear you know you can wear certain things that will get men to look and go, "Whoa!" If you use what you wear to attract people to take advantage of the look of a man then you're compromising something that's very important. Because you will get the attention. There are some girls that will dress in a particular way in order to get the attention of guys. And guys will look at those girls and go, "Wow," and those girls will feel like they're being cared for or loved.

But let me tell you something, young ladies. Guys when they're attracted in that particular way are looking for something to conquer. And if they can conquer it then good they're off to something else. What you want is you want to attract a man, a young man, to your character, to your heart, not to your body. You want him to be attracted to your heart so that that's what he falls in love with.

Many women make a trade. They trade off the attention that they could receive by dressing in a particular way to catch this thing that's inside of a man and say, "Oh I got it," and they feel good about going around as men turn their head and watch this woman walk down the street. But they

trade off something really important. They trade off their dignity, they trade off their character, they trade off their convictions.

The queen in this case said no. She had a conviction and she said, “I’m not going to be used in this particular way.” The convictions that we have are strategic because they help set the standards for the grid in our lives. So when we’re tempted in a particular way we have those convictions, they’re ready for us to fight the battle.

Vashti wouldn’t play along with the world’s system. She said no. The Bible is a storybook, it’s much more than a storybook, but it’s a story of people of faith. Some had convictions and some didn’t.

When you think of some of the guys who had convictions you think of Joseph in the Old Testament, you think of Stephen in the New Testament. You think of Daniel who had conviction, you think of Paul. Men of conviction that would not compromise what they knew to be right because of some outward pressure.

But we also have stories of people who caved in when it came to conviction. You’ve got Judas in the Old Testament. You’ve got people who were back and forth like Peter. Remember in the New Testament Peter was strong in some ways. He’d talk about the Lord and he’d be powerful, then the next minute he’s lying and saying, “I don’t even know God.” There’s that rustling that goes on. Abraham’s the same way from the Old Testament. He came from Ur and by conviction he follows God all the way over to Israel and then he ends up lying. There’s this rustling that goes on. When we have convictions like Vashti did then good things can happen inside of our hearts.

There’s a bigger lesson here than just man-woman relationships. There’s a lesson about having convictions inside of our hearts. What are we going to do when we’re tested? What are we going to do when we’re tempted? What are we going to do when there’s something out there like a raise or a promotion or the appraisal of someone? Or the disapproval of something we’re trying to avoid? What are we going to do? How are we going to handle that? Will we maintain our integrity or will we sacrifice it for something else?

Let’s go on to verse 13. See what he does here. *Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king—Karshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.*

He says to them, *“According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?” he asked. “She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her.”*

Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, “Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women, and so

they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.'

Maybe Memukan had a problem with his own wife. Maybe they're all saying to themselves, "If my wife gets wind of this, we're going to have major revolt in our homes." Yeah, just imagine. Can you imagine what would happen.

Verse 18: *This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord.* Oh can you imagine. Now we're going to have the Persian Organization of Women. We've got this organized women; they're now going to come out and they're going to be a real problem for us. We better do something about this.

How can we gain the respect of Vashti? That's the question. Here's their solution, verse 19. They're going to try to legislate it. I just want to suggest you don't legislate respect, but they're going to try that anyway.

"Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media. You have to know that a law of the Medes and Persians is a law that couldn't be repealed. In other words, once they make it it's done, it's made. It's a very strong law. So let's make this decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest."

You think that's going to happen? You think all the women are going to respect their husbands because we legislate it? No, that's not exactly the right approach here, King Xerxes. You're making a mistake.

See, there are a lot of guys who misunderstand how to earn the respect of their wives. There are a lot of men who try to gain that respect by legislating it. Here's the law; I'm going to lay it down. They try to control their wives or they try to use anger to put their wives in their place. That's a mistake. That's not how you earn the respect of a wife.

If you want to earn the respect of a wife go to a Bible and learn. 1 Peter 3:7 says this: *Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers.*

Men, you don't legislate respect. You don't overpower your wife. You earn that respect through gentleness.

But the king listens to Memukan. Verse 21: *The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom (that's a big kingdom), to each province in its own script and to each people in their own*

language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

You don't take that privilege; you earn it. This guy's making a mistake and it's going to cost him. It's certainly going to cost Queen Vashti. It's a difficult situation for all of them.

Just look at chapter 2 verse 1. This is a preview of next week. Obviously God is in control. God is providentially working in the situation and is going to open the door for Esther now to come in as the next queen. So God's in control, but notice Xerxes, you can even read this in Esther 2:1, he seems to be sorry for what he had done. After all, she was a very beautiful woman and now he's lost her. She can't come into his presence anymore.

Esther 2:1 says, *Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided (and he got sober again), he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.* In other words, he remembered that and he goes, "Wow. That was a mistake. I've got to find another queen." So that's when Esther is going to come on the scene.

I'm really impressed with the whole story of Esther because it's a story of Esther who grows up in a nontraditional family. We'll be talking more about that later. She's raised by her uncle and God had a special plan for her life and a special way that He was going to be working in her and has His hand on her through the difficult situations.

But before we get to chapter 2 and following, we're in chapter 1 and we're learning a very important lesson. Maybe the lesson for you today is not about male-female relationships. If there's something there for you, you want to take it and apply it to your life.

Maybe the lesson for you today is about conviction. Here's a woman who stood out, Vashti, because she had a conviction about life. She was unwilling to remain the queen and sacrifice her integrity. She was unwilling to have all of the applause and all of the fashion and all of the pleasantries of being in the palace because she wanted to keep her integrity.

Each one of us are faced with that challenge every once in a while when we come to a place and someone calls on us to do something that would cause us to compromise who we are, compromise our integrity. It's a very important lesson for us to recognize that God wants us to remain holy, God wants us to remain righteous, He wants us to hold onto that thing inside of us that's called integrity. We can only do that through God's grace.

When God's working in our lives we're pleasing somebody else, we're not pleasing people. If we're eager to please people, we get into trouble. If we're pleasing God then He allows us to know what to do and how to respond in those difficult situations. Vashti's going to lose her ability to be the queen, but she kept something very important; she kept her integrity. A valuable lesson for all of us as we find ourselves in those situations occasionally.

I want to draw your attention to a passage of scripture in Psalm 24. In Psalm 24 just look at these words because I want to meditate on them for just a moment. I'm going to read them through and I want you to think about them and allow God to speak to you from His word about your life and

about what God may be wanting to touch in your life about purity, about doing the right thing, about having integrity.

Psalm 24:4-6 says, *He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.*

You see, when we seek God's face then we can say, "God, I want my hands to be clean, I want my heart to be pure. Lord, that's what I want to give to you. I want you to do that to me in my own personal walk. I want you to help me know how to live there. Lord, give me the power to live in the muck every day by doing what's right."

Sometimes it's something that we need to avoid that's evil, like pornography or something, but other times it's just maintaining our self control, controlling our anger, or choosing what kind of entertainment we're going to use. It's taking the convictions that God has given to us and saying, "Lord, I want to have clean hands. Lord, I want to have a pure heart before you. Lord, I want to seek you."

I'm going to read it all again. Allow this to soak into your heart. *He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. He will receive blessing from the Lord and vindication from God his Savior. Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek your face, O God of Jacob.*

[PRAYER] Lord, we come before you and ask you to cleanse our hearts. Give us a pure heart, a heart that's pure, that's clean. Give us clean hands so that as we come before you and represent you to others people see those clean hands. Lord, if there's any dirt in our lives, any uncleanness right now we ask that you would put your finger on it in our hearts and we come before you and we repent. We sacrifice our will and our desires. We want to serve you in everything that we do. So, Lord, take away that sin. Give us the forgiveness that only you can give. We repent of things that we've done wrong. We ask you to be wholeheartedly in control of our lives. We want to have that pure heart, we want to have those clean hands in our lives. So do it in our hearts today. We ask in Jesus' name, amen.