

# A Tale of Two Empires

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Date: 21 November 2018

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, good afternoon, everyone. If I can break into your conversations, a very warm welcome to you to our lunchtime talk today. Welcome to the Tron Church. And if you're first time with us, then you're very welcome indeed. Before we get going, just one or two announcements just to flag up to you. Christmas is fast approaching, as you will no doubt know. And you should see on your seats these little cards which detail some of the things happening here in the church over the Christmas period. So these are detailing things happening on Sundays and also a few other events as a Christmas concert on Friday the 14th and Saturday the 15th and other carol services. So do make use of that to come along and bring a friend to some of these events. And you also see on the cards here that on Wednesday the 19th of December we're having our lunchtime Christmas carol service here. So that will be 1.15 on Wednesday the 19th. So if you're a regular here, then do come and bring others. It would be a great thing to bring people along to you on Wednesday the 19th. We should have little cards next time for the Wednesdays. We're doing a little series through December on the Wednesdays in December for Christmas. But you've got all the other details here for the other things happening through December here in the Tron. So do please use that and take that away with you.

Good. We're doing a little one-off today in the book of Esther. So if you would turn to Esther chapter 1 and you'll find that on page 410 if you're using the blue Bibles there.

Esther chapter 1 and 2 you'll find on page 410. I'm being a little ambitious today given the time we have. It's a reasonably long reading but it's a good one and hopefully we'll get through it in our half an hour together. But let me pray as you're turning to that. Let's pray.

Our Father God, we thank you that we can meet here this afternoon in the midst of a busy week, in the midst of a busy day. And so would you help us now to focus on your eternal truths?

Would you minister to each of our hearts and send us from this place refreshed and eager to serve your people and to serve your world, having been instructed, encouraged, and having been given hope to endure. So please help us now for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

[ 2 : 3 0 ] Esther chapter 1 from verse 1. Now in the days of Ahasuerus, Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in these days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa the capital, in the third year of his reign, he gave a feast for all his officials and servants, the army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces where before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and splendor, the pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. 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 for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother of pearl and precious stones. Drinks were served in golden vessels. Vessels of different kinds and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. And drinking was according to this edict.

There is no compulsion. For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus. On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Memochan, Bistar, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagatha, Zetha, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this, the king became enraged and his anger burned within him. Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times, for this was the king's procedure towards all who were versed in law and judgment, the men next to

him being Karshena, Shethar, Abmatha, Tarshish, Merez, Masana, and Memohan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face and sat first in the kingdom. According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs? Then Memohan said in the presence of the king and the officials, not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in the provinces of King Ahasuerus.

For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will all say, King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before her, and she did not come. This very day, the noble women of Persia and Media, who have heard of the queen's behavior, will say the same to the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.

So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike. This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memohan proposed. He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script, and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household, and speak according to the language of his people.

[ 6 : 34 ] After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's young men, who attended him, said, let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king, and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the Harim in Susa, under the capital, under the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the women.

Let their cosmetics be given to them, and let the young women who pleases the king be queen, instead of Vashti. This pleased the king, and he did so.

Now there was a Jew in Susa, the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jeho, the son of Shemi, son of Shachish, a Benjamite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives, carried away when Jeconiah, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had carried away. He was bringing up Hadassah, that is, Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother.

The young women had a beautiful figure, and was lovely to look at. And when her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa, the citadel, in custody of Hegai, Esther, also was taken into the king's palace and put into the custody of Hegai, who had charged with the women. And the young women pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided Esther with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. And every day, Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Now, when the turn came for each young woman to go into King Ahasuerus, after being 12 months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of the beautifying, six months with oil and myrrh, and six months of spices and ornaments for women, when the young women went into the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.

[ 8 : 58 ] In the evening, she would go in, and in the morning, she would return to the second harem in the custody of Shazgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go into the king again, unless the king delighted in her and summoned her by name. When the turn came for Esther, the daughter of Habahel, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter to go into the king, she asked for nothing except what Haggai, the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised.

Now, Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus into his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh

year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women. And she won grace and favor in his sight, more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants. It was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

Well, we'll stop there. But do keep that open for the next few moments as we think about this together. Now, one of the great cinematic experiences comes at the beginning of every Star Wars film.

You're sat in the dark and you hear the familiar music composed by John Williams starting up. And then you get the text, don't you, scrolling from the bottom of the screen. A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away.

[10:44] And then you get a little summary, picking out some of the key details, some of the key people and places which bring you up to speed when the action kicks in.

And these opening chapters in Esther, they serve a very similar function. They set the scene for the astonishing drama that is about to unfold in the rest of the book.

When you get home, read through the rest of Esther. It's astonishing. It's a gripping read. But these opening chapters, they set the scene. And we learn a great deal about the situation of God's people living in a foreign land.

And much like your standard Star Wars film, we are, in the book of Esther, thrown into the midst of a great conflict. It is yet another episode in the age-old battle that has raged down through the generations.

From the very opening pages of the Bible, a battle has raged between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. A cosmic war that bursts onto the stage of human history from time to time.

[11:54] And the book of Esther is just the latest manifestation of that great battle between the eternal God and the great enemy, Satan. And the book of Esther, it traces the story of how a very weak-looking people, living in exile in the powerful and vast Persian Empire, how they escape what seems to be certain annihilation.

Just read on through the story. Chapter 3, they look absolutely doomed. But it's not just an interesting story about something that happened in an empire far, far away.

The New Testament constantly encourages Christians, God's people living today, to make the stories of God's dealings with his people then part of their story.

The Apostle Paul in Romans, writing to the New Testament church, he says that whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction. That through endurance and through the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

So this story, it is our story. And Esther is a great story for our times. At the heart of the book, as I said, lies a great conflict.

[13:16] A conflict between two communities, between two empires. The powerful-looking empire of Persia, and the very weak-looking empire of God, the Jewish people.

And we don't have to think too hard, do we, about the predicament of being a small Christian minority in a powerful world that wants little to do with God and wants to push the Christian faith to the margins.

And there's great temptation, isn't there, to either simply assimilate or to despair. And so we need the book of Esther.

We need it so that we'll be instructed, so that we'll have hope, so that we'll endure and receive the encouragement of these scriptures. So let's look more closely.

We'll look at this briefly, getting the big picture of these two chapters. But it's a tale of two empires, the visible empire of the world and the hidden empire of God.

[14:18] So chapter one, we see the visible empire of the world. It's seemingly powerful. Yet ultimately, it's laughable. So we're shown here in chapter one, the very visible impressiveness of the Persian empire.

Yet beneath the surface, it is vulnerable and not quite as strong as it first appears. In fact, we're invited to laugh at the visible empire. Look at the first nine verses, which paint a picture of immense power, vast power.

We find ourselves right in the center of the Persian empire, there in the capital, Susa. The king is an immensely powerful man. His kingdom stretches over 127 provinces from India through to Ethiopia.

Now, if you were to sketch out the map of his empire on today's world, it would take in northwest India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, northern Greece, Egypt, Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and northern Sudan.

Most of the known world at that time. It is a vast empire. Inescapable. And the king, Ahasuerus, we read there in verse 3, he throws the party to end all parties.

[15:48] Anyone who is anyone is there, and at last, for six months. Imagine that. Imagine Donald Trump throwing a six-month party. Great strength, great power and wealth is on display as the king throws this huge party.

And really, it serves to gather an army. A few years later, he will go to war against Greece and lose. But this is about gathering support, gaining loyalty. So he throws this big party.

But then, verse 5, he throws another party. It's the week-long after-party for all the people who are present in Susa, the citadel, both great and small.

It's a party for his loyal civil servants. All those who have been working so hard over the last six months in this great party. So he throws a smaller party.

But note all the extraordinary detail. The decor, the expensive materials, the goblets of gold, the wine that is flowing. This is a powerful king.

[16:50] A powerful empire which offers the very best of the world's luxuries to all those who are loyal. So attractive, isn't it? So alluring.

All this power and wealth. And this was the world empire in which God's people lived. This is the context in which everything else unfolds.

And these grand displays of power of the empire, they're not limited to Persia, are they? In the 5th century BC. Every empire since, every superpower today, flaunts its power, flexes its muscles.

And it can seem intimidating, can't it? It's great pressure to assimilate and go with the flow. And that is the world God's people then and today often find themselves in.

But look on to verses 10 and 11 and what follows. Yes, the king is powerful, but he is a bit of a loose cannon. We're introduced in verse 9 to Queen Vashti, who's hosting a separate party.

[17:57] And in verse 10, the king, after seven days of hard parting, is at last merry with wine. And in this state of inebriation, he dispatches the eunuchs, all seven of them, to bring in Queen Vashti in order to show her off.

For it says, there she was lovely to look at. But what happens next, it's really quite surprising. It's unexpected. And in the second half, chapter 1, we're invited to laugh at King Ahasuerus.

And we see that things are not perhaps as impressive and as powerful as they might first seem.

Look at verse 12 and what happens there. The great king who governs almost all the known world, the king who has thrown the most lavish party in the history of the world at great expense, he summons his wife.

And she says, no. She says, no. It's brilliant, isn't it? He can command a huge army, but not his wife. It shows the limits, doesn't it, of human power.

The empire of the world has great power, but it cannot bend a human will. And so the king, he responds with the most marvelous overreaction.

[19:12] It's brilliant. His anger burns, he summons the legal experts, and the situation very quickly escalates. The entire fabric of the Persian empire is deemed to be under threat.

Look at verse 17. The queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt. The social order is in danger.

And so legislation is quickly drawn up, translated into all the language of the empire, and then it's sent to every corner of the empire. And in doing so, the king is ensuring that everyone will hear about what's happened.

Everyone will hear about the queen's refusal. It's fantastic. And as a heiress, the king is made to look absolutely ridiculous, isn't he? You can imagine, can't you, the wry smiles as this edict was delivered across the empire.

You can imagine the hashtag on Twitter, Vashti says no. It's brilliant. And it's wonderful satire. And the writer wants us to see, the writer wants us to see the mask slipping from King Ahasuerus.

[20:24] He wants us to see behind the shows of power and to see what's really there. As one writer puts it, it is easy to be dazzled by the empire's ostentatious show, but it is empty of real power at its center.

The empire of the world is just a glittering hologram that has no real substance. That's the picture we're being shown here. And so, for us to defend ourselves against being assimilated, we must learn to laugh at the empire.

And that's what we're being encouraged to do here with this ridiculous situation with Queen Vashti. The empire, and the emperor in particular, we learn here in chapter one, despite all the power and wealth, has no clothes.

Even the most powerful of this world's rulers, the most powerful nations, the special interest groups, the lobbies, they are nothing in the face of the almighty God, the true emperor of the eternal empire. It's a bit like my little boy trying to take me down in a wrestling match. No matter how much he tries, no matter how fierce he tries to be, he's got no chance.

[ 21 : 47 ] It's laughable. And so Esther chapter one, it invites us to laugh at the empires of this world that look so powerful, that look so strong.

The mask is slipping here. The writer's showing us the empire really has no clothes. But let's look on to the second chapter. These opening chapters are a tale of two empires.

We've seen the visible empire of the world in chapter one, seemingly powerful, yet ultimately it's laughable. But now in chapter two, we see the hidden empire of God and it's seemingly weak, seemingly vulnerable.

So the chapter begins where chapter one left off. After the king's anger abates, perhaps he's sobered up, he remembers that he's banished his wife.

He remembers Vashti. And this presents a problem. He needs a new queen. And so the king's young men come up with a plan that they know the king is going to go for.

[ 22 : 54 ] They propose a Miss Persia contest. Although, to be honest, that's the rather polite PG-rated title you might give this proposed competition.

It's not so much a beauty contest, is it? But rather, a performance in the bedroom competition. The most beautiful virgins in the whole empire are gathered together and they will, in turn, have a night with the king.

And the one who pleases him, well, she'll become queen. Now this sments in our minds, doesn't it? The sort of place, the sort of empire the Persian empire was.

It's a cruel empire where citizens can be rounded up for this competition, a night with the king at his whim. It's a sad place, isn't it?

Not a pleasant place. But up until this point, you might well wonder what on earth is a book like this doing in our Bibles?

[ 23 : 58 ] There is no mention of God, is there, up until this point? In fact, there's no mention of God at all in the whole book. No mention of his people, nothing. Interesting bit of history about King Ahasuerus, but what's this in our Bibles for?

Well, verse 5 makes the connection for us. We now begin to see why this is in our Bibles. Look at verse 5. Now there was a Jew in Susa, the citadel, whose name was Mordecai.

So Mordecai, he's a Jew, he's a descendant of King Saul. And one who, verse 6, had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives, carried away with Jeconiah, the king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had carried away.

Mordecai is a Jew, he's an exile from Jerusalem. And this is the situation that underlines the rest of the book. This is a book about the people of God, the Jews, living in exile under a foreign king. The Jews who ultimately belonged to the empire of God but now find themselves living in the empire of Ahasuerus. And on the surface, things do not look promising, do they?

[ 25 : 16 ] God's people here, they seem very weak, powerless, without much prospect of anything. But against that backdrop, we zoom in on two individuals, two of God's people in particular, two Jews, Mordecai and Esther.

And so here's Mordecai, he's likely a civil servant working in the citadel, and he has responsibility for a young woman who will play a central role in all of this to come.

Esther, plucked from obscurity, she soon finds herself somehow elevated to the position of the queen of Persia. So she was taken in verse 8, she was taken as part of this empire-wide search for the new queen, and she enters into the care of Haggai, and she very quickly does well.

She moves to the best place in the harem, all the while keeping her real identity as a Jew hidden. Nobody knows. Now the narrator makes no comment, good or bad, as to that decision to not declare her true people.

But I think it does tell us that for her to do so, for her to declare her identity, that would be dangerous. Why else keep it a secret? The Jews were a minority, and as we'll see, they had real enemies if you read on through the book.

[ 26 : 45 ] But her identity and keeping it secret, that also sets the scene for all that is to follow in the rest of the story. Whose people you are, whose people you identify with, which empire you side with, that is going to be very significant indeed as you read on through the story.

So Esther enters into the competition, and at last, verse 15, her turn comes. And Esther, well, she does very well.

She is the victor in this game of sex, verse 17. The king loved Esther more than all the women, and he sets the royal crown on her head.

Now again, the narrator makes no evaluation as to her actions. The application is not be an Esther. Esther. I can't imagine encouraging my own daughter to take a similar path ten years down the line. Can you? You'd be great on Love Island, daughter. What would Esther do? That is not the point. I don't think she had a choice anyway. It says she was taken. It just happened to her.

[ 28 : 02 ] But what is clear in the bigger sweep of the story is that the Lord's invisible hand is very clearly at work. He is bringing his people to the right place at the right time in order to bring salvation for all of his people.

There is a great threat that arises in chapter 3, and Mordecai and Esther, they are the crucial players, at least on the human level, in all that is about to follow.

Esther, an undercover Jew, she's brought from absolute obscurity to the throne of the king. She's perfectly placed for what is to come.

But this episode also offers great encouragement and comfort when we find ourselves in situations where every choice, where every option is an odd mix of right and wrong.

There were no clean-cut answers for Esther. Imagine her there in the harem waiting for her turn. What did he do? She's found herself in the middle of Persian Love Island and she's won.

[ 29 : 10 ] And no doubt, there's no doubt she would have looked back on some of the things that happened with regret and sadness. But God is so gracious, so sovereign, that he is able to use even events like these for his own purposes.

you can trust him in the midst of life's mess. We can trust him in the middle of our mess because God is sovereign.

He can use even things like this, which if you didn't know the rest of the story would just seem shocking. But the Lord is using it. But it's not just Esther.

Mordecai, if we read on to the end of chapter 2, he is also perfectly placed. He hears about a secret plot against the king. He's able to get the message to the king via Esther and to save the king's life. And significantly, his name is recorded in the book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king.

The stage is now set for the story that is about to explode at the start of chapter 3.

[ 30 : 26 ] It's like the beginning of Star Wars. The text is now disappearing off into the distance. The context is now in place. The world that the exiled Jews find themselves in, it seems, on the face of it, seems very powerful, very impressive, frightening even.

But we're given reason to laugh, aren't we? these chapters are dripping with satire. And not only that, key people through God's invisible providence have found themselves in key positions and will find themselves as the story unfolds used against all the odds used for his saving purposes.

This is how God works. He works through the weak looking things of this world. God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the strong.

God chose what is low and despised in the world. A carpenter from Nazareth put to death by the mighty Roman Empire. But all was not as it seems.

That is how God works salvation. salvation. And that is how it was for Jesus. And that is how it is for all who are his. So in the face of the empires of this world, don't assimilate, don't fear, but rather laugh.

[ 31 : 58 ] Laugh and know that there is a hidden empire, one that will outlast all the empires of this world, one that will not fail, one that will go on forever.

Well, let's pray as we close. Father, you know our hearts, you know how often we fear at what we see around us, we fear the great powers of this world, we fear the direction things go in.

But Lord, how reassuring it is to know that you are on the throne and you will in the end have the last laugh because you alone are sovereign.

So would you please help us to be a people that live and walk by faith and not by what we see. So help us to live in light of the hidden empire and to trust you for we ask it in Jesus' name.  
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.  
[ 33 : 14 ] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.