

Invisible Yet Invincible

(Esther 1:1-21)

(preached 12/31/14; Pine Grove BC Wed PM)

Introduction

The book of Hebrews defines faith as being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.

And that is true of faith.

We believe in something that we cannot see.

This is easy to understand because the world is full of unseen forces.

For instance, if you climbed to the top of a big building, what keeps you from jumping off?

There are no arrows in the air that are pointing down to the ground.

There is no great force that you feel on your shoulders that makes you think you would go down if you stepped off.

But none of us would jump off because we all believe in gravity.

And we know that gravity is real, and it will push us to the ground in a hurry if we jump off.

Along these same lines, have you ever seen the wind?

No you feel the effects of the wind when you walk outside and you see the effects of the wind we you look at the trees.

So, you believe that wind exists even though you can't see it.

The truth is that faith, gravity and wind all exist, and we know this because we see the effects of each of these in the world in which we live.

Well, another unseen force is the world is the sovereignty and providence of God.

As Baptists, we affirm the sovereignty of God.

Simply put, we believe that God is actively in control of all things at all times.

It is a trait of God that we have a difficult time understanding because the truth is that we are not sovereign in anything.

We have little or no control of anything in this world.

And because of that, we are in awe and show reverence and worship to God who sees and knows and has power over everything.

Yet, there are people in other denominations that don't believe that the Bible teaches that God is sovereign.

They believe that God doesn't know the future; they think that he reacts to what happens in the world.

They believe that he responds to what man does in the world.

They believe that certain actions catch God by surprise.

Though they think that God is powerful, they don't think that he is the cause of all things in the world.

In their view of God, he is unable to change the course of world events.

Therefore, he is forced to change his plans if the world moves in a different direction.

Let me say first of all, I reject that view of God.

God is not a God who is at the mercy of man.

He is not a God who has no idea what will happen tomorrow.

He is a God who knows all things even what will happen tomorrow and 50 years from tomorrow.

And why do I believe that?

Because that is how God describes himself in the Bible.

Time after time in the Scriptures, we see an all-powerful, all-knowing, all-everywhere God.

On Wednesday nights, we have seen God's sovereignty over and over.

He sent a storm to get Jonah off a ship.

He sent a whale to swallow Jonah.

He sent Naomi to Moab where she met Ruth.

He sent Ruth to a field that Boaz owned.

And these are the only instances of that in the Bible.

There are countless others.

God has been and is now in control of everything in this universe.

And it will be that way for eternity.

And for the next few Wednesday nights, we are going to be reminded of God's sovereignty in the book of Esther.

Now, I am not trying to beat a dead horse by turning to another book that shows God's sovereignty.

Truth is, God's sovereignty is on every page of the Bible.

You will not find a verse in all the Bible where God is not in control.

However, in some books, the picture of God's sovereignty is really clear.

When I watch see God part the Red Sea, I get a clear picture that God is in control.

On the other hand, there are times when God works behind the scenes.

When a woman named Ruth wanders into a field, it is not as obvious what God is doing until you learn more.

And though I think that the theme of the book of Esther is that God is sovereign over his people Israel, I don't think it is as obvious here as in other books.

For one, there is not one miraculous event in the book of Esther.

God doesn't send a plague.

God doesn't wipe out an entire nation.

God doesn't send a big fish.

You will not find any of that in the book of Esther.

In fact, you will not find God's name once in the entire book.

For some, that has been a huge stumbling block in believing that the book of Esther belongs in the Bible.

For me, it is a wonderful picture of God's sovereignty.

Because the truth is that most of God's people never see a true miracle in their life.

We never see God work out His plan in a grand way before our eyes.

We simply live our lives in an ordinary way while God is constantly working out His plan before us in the common ordinary way.

And I think we need to remember that an ordinary life is perfectly fine before the Lord.

In fact, there have been lots of books that have recently been written about how people who aren't leading these radical lives are being all the Christian that they need to be.

There are young pastors and Christian authors who are encouraging people to sell everything and go live for the Lord in an extraordinary way.

Now, are some Christians called to do that, but those people are exceptions to the rule.

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians in 1 Thess 4:10-11..

But we urge you, brethren, to excel still more,¹¹ and to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life and attend to your own business and work with your hands, just as we commanded you,¹² so that you will ^[i]behave properly toward outsiders and^[i] not be in any need.

And I think we should live for the Lord to the extent that He calls us to go anywhere..

But the Lord is also glorified by the quiet life that is led in submission and obedience to Him.

Yet, in that life, God's sovereignty is still at work.

And I think we live in a generation of people who will see the sovereignty of God under attack.

Because we are living in a day when evil is on the rise.

We live in a day when natural disasters are more widely reported than ever before.

And because of that, we live in a day where people are constantly asking....

If there is a God, is He really in control?

And we as believers need to shout....

Yes, he is real, and Yes, he is in control.

And so, I think it is important to drive down the truth of God's sovereignty deep down in our hearts.

WE need to see God in control in the past, so that we know he is in control in the future.

We need to see God in control in the past, so that we know that he is in control now.

My grandmother had a really old looking swing in her backyard.

The wood looked rotted and the chains were rusty.

And anytime someone would start to sit in it, they would ease back into it and slowly sit down.

Well, the truth is that the swing was still very solid.

Though it didn't look that way, it was a very trustworthy swing.

And once you sat in it and gained confidence in it, the next time you sat in it, you could just plop down.

Well, that is a one way to think about God's sovereignty in our lives.

We need to read about it and see the effects of it, so that we can plop down and rest in it when things look bad.

Going into a new year is a time of great uncertainty in many ways.

Where will you be next new year's eve?

What will you be doing?

I don't think none of us know the answers to either of those questions.

Where will God be next New Year's Eve?

Completely and actively in control of all things at all times and bringing His perfect plan to pass.

And for God's people who are walking with Him, that means wherever you are next year,....

You can have confidence that you will be right where the Lord wants you.

So, let's dive into the book of Esther tonight.

Not sure how far we will get, but let's try to get through the first chapter.

Let me try to get you into the right time frame to understand the time when the events of Esther take place.

Now when I think of the OT, I try to have a big timeline in my mind...

Because it is so easy to get confused when you hear names in the OT.

Was Daniel before or after David?

Was Jeremiah before or after Solomon?

So what I do is break the OT down into 500 year parts?

The first date you need to put on your timeline is 2000 BC.

And the name you put above that date is Abraham.

Adam and Eve, Noah, the tower of Babel are all before 2000 BC.

So Abraham which is Gen 12 goes above 2000 BC.

Then the next date is 1500 BC, and the name above that is Moses.

Now, before we go to 1000 BC, you also need to think about the nation of Israel with each of these dates as well.

2000 BC and Abraham, what do you see when you think of Israel?

Very tiny group.

What do you think when you think of Moses in 1500 BC?

Large nation of millions walking through Red Sea.

Then the next date is 1000 BC.

And the name above that is the name David.

And what do you see when it comes to Israel?

Nation with David as king.

Then you see 500 BC.

And what name should you put here?

Well, I personally put the name Daniel.

He was a little earlier...around 600 BC.

And what do we see when we think of Israel?

A nation in captivity, but also a nation that is about to emerge and rebuild the temple.

And then the next date is 0, and we have the birth of Jesus.

So that is my big timeline in my mind.

2000 is Abraham. 1500 is Moses. 1000 is David.
500 is Daniel.

And I see tiny Israel. Growing Israel. United Israel.

And oppressed Israel.

And I say all that to say that the events of the book of Esther occurred after 500 BC.

The nation of Israel is coming out of captivity.

So Esther occurs in 500-400 BC most likely.

It is in fact a very late book.

God will go silent for 400 years before Jesus is born, and Esther will describe events in the life of Israel before this silence.

With that said, let's begin reading in the book of Esther.

And that is what tonight will be for the most part, simply reading the Bible and I will make a few comments after each section.

Let's start with the first 9 verses, which I have called....

I. A Fantastic Feast (1-9)

1 Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to ^[a]Ethiopia over 127 provinces, ² in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was at the citadel in Susa,

Ahasuerus was the king of the Persian empire.

Here is a map of his kingdom in that day.

It was huge and had four capital cities, Babylon, Ecbatana, Persepolis and Susa....

Which would be the place where the king lived during the winter..

And so we have a king who is ruling a huge kingdom in his winter headquarters...

Verse 3...

³ in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of his provinces being in his presence. ^{4 [b]} And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.

A 6 month party at the palace!

The cost of the royal wedding a few years ago was 34 million dollars.

And the inauguration of an American president usually costs around 200 million dollars.

However, a six month party in today's dollars would far surpass these numbers.

And verses 5-9 detail all the extravagance.

⁵ When these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present at the citadel in Susa, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace. ⁶ There were hangings of fine white and violet linen held by cords of fine purple linen on silver rings and marble columns, and couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. ⁷ Drinks were served in golden vessels of various kinds, and the royal wine was plentiful according to the king's ^[c]bounty. ⁸ The drinking was done according to the law, there was no compulsion, for so the king had given orders to each official of his household that he should do according to the desires of each person. ⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the ^[d]palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.

So, we see all the elegance.

Even couches made of gold and silver.

There was even enough wealth for the Queen to host her own party.

However, all the wealth and power in the world is no opponent to the hand of God working in the world.

You may command 1000s of men, but if God has other plans, your power is useless.

And that is what we find in verses 10-12...

II. A Remarkable Refusal (10-12)

Verse 10...

¹⁰ On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, ¹¹ to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful. ¹² But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.

Here is this powerful man, yet he lacks the power to make his wife obey his commands.

We have all been here as parents.

We are stronger and wiser, yet if one of our kids refuses to do something, we can be powerless to make them do it.

I have seen kids refuse to go into a store and simply sit down outside the door of the store and scream.

And if they are a certain age, you can't even pick them up and carry them in.

They will go limp and refuse to get up.

And here we get a picture of the wife of the world's most powerful man refusing to come before him and others at the party.

Why did she refuse?

We simply don't know.

Although it may be obvious to us that a woman would have no desire to be paraded before a bunch of drunks by her drunk husband...

We can't be certain because the Bible doesn't tell us that.

But we do know this.

The sovereignty of God was at work behind the scenes because her refusal to go before Ahasuerus kept the wheels turning in God's plan.

Now, this brings up a great question that often comes up about God's sovereignty.

Does God cause people to sin in order to bring about his plan?

And I think most of us would answer with "certainly not."

First, I don't know if this was sinful on Vashti's part.

If her husband was asking her to do something inappropriate before other men, there is no sin in refusing to do that.

Wives must first be obedient to God.

But beyond this, what about Rahab telling a lie or what about Jacob being deceitful?

Was God behind those sins to bring about His sovereign will?

And I would answer again with a clear “No.”

God is never the author of sin.

So, how do we understand God’s sovereignty working through sin and disobedience?

And I simply say that God works despite our sin not because of it.

Do what is right and trust God to work out his plan.

Here’s the simple truth...If God never worked in the lives of people who sinned, what would he be able to do?

Nothing. Because sin is part of this world.

So on one hand, God hates sin.

And on the other hand, he works around sin to accomplish His will in the world.

And in the book of Esther, we will see God accomplish his purpose even though people make bad choices.

And I am not saying that Vashti was disobedient here.

In fact, I tend to think that she did the right thing by refusing to obey the king.

However, the king has the last word...

III. A Lasting Law (13-22)

¹³ *Then the king said to the wise men who understood the times—for it was the custom of the king so to speak before all who knew law and justice* ¹⁴ *and were close to him: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media who* ^[e] *had access to the king's presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom—*

¹⁵ *“According to law, what is to be done with Queen Vashti, because she did not* ^[f] *obey the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?”* ¹⁶ *In the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, “Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but also all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.* ¹⁷ *For the queen's conduct will* ^[g] *become known to all the women causing them* ^[h] *to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.’* ¹⁸ *This day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's conduct will speak in the same way to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger.* ¹⁹ *If it pleases the king, let a royal* ^[i] *edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot* ^[j] *be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to* ^[k] *another who is more worthy than*

she.²⁰ When the king's edict which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, ^[l]great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small."

²¹ This word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did ^[m]as Memucan proposed.²² So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

In 1974, Robert Preston entered the military with the dream of becoming an Army helicopter pilot.

Unfortunately, he flunked out of helicopter school after a few weeks.

But worse than that was his response to being denied his dream.

You see, Preston stole a helicopter at Fort Meade flew it to the White House and hovered over it for 6 minutes.

HE then tried to land it on the lawn, but when he saw that the Secret Service wasn't pleased, he took off...

Which led to a helicopter chase over Washington DC.

Eventually, he flew back to the White House where the Secret Service began shooting at him.

He landed the helicopter, was arrested and taken to prison for a year.

That is a great example of a overreacting.

Well, that is what Ahasuerus does here.

My wife won't obey, so I am going to get rid of her and pass a law that the man is master over every house.

Talk about overreacting!!

Here is man who go to extreme lengths to salvage what?

His pride.

So, he calls in his advisors and passes a law.

That is the action of a man who will stop at nothing to save face.

And that my friends, is a very dangerous person.

Yet, here again we see God at work in the lives of world rulers to bring about his plan.

Remember how Mary and Joseph ended up in Bethlehem?

Caesar Augustus issued a decree that there be a census taken of the entire Roman world.

And because of that law, two teenagers make the trip to Bethlehem to give birth to Jesus as God had predicted in His word.

No one is beyond God's reach.

No stone is too heavy for Him to overturn to accomplish his purposes.

And here we see a man who was ironically at a party celebrating his own greatness...

But we see that it was actually a celebration of God's sovereignty to direct the affairs of the world even at the highest levels of kingdoms and kings.

Listen to what Chuck Swindoll says about this...

"Don't fall into thinking that God is asleep when it comes to nations, or that he is out of touch when it comes to carnal banquets (of kings), or that he sits in heaven wringing his hands when it comes to godless rulers who make unfair, rash, or stupid decisions. Mark this down in permanent ink: God is always at work. (Refuse to panic and overreact. Take a deep breath and be reminded that God is sovereignly in control of this world from the bottom all the way to the top.)"

Conclusion

And that is really a good place to end at this point, even though we haven't even met Esther yet.

Because the truth of chapter 1 is this.....

Even when we can't see God, we need to be comforted by the fact that he sees us.

It is like those mirrors that are in the police interview rooms.

Or at least that is what I hear.

IF you are on one side, you simply can't see beyond the mirror.

However, if you are the other side, you can see clearly through it.

That is a small picture of the world we live in.

We try to understand and see what is happening in the world, but we only see our own reflection of how we think things should be.

Fortunately, we have a God who sees everything perfectly from beginning to end.

And he is constantly at work to bring about His perfect plan.

And that is what we are going to get to see in the next few weeks in the book of Esther.

Lets pray.

