

Sermon 2: Esther 1:10-22: Queen Vashti is Removed

OUTLINE

The facts of the matter
The lessons to be had

INTRODUCTION

The book of Esther is all about how God stopped a Jewish genocide; preserved the people of God in fulfillment of His promises; and ensured the bloodline from which the Messiah and Savior of the world, Jesus Christ, would be born. The book ends with the instituting of the feast of Purim, a feast given to commemorate this deliverance, one of only two feasts not commanded in the law of Moses. It is all about how God uses the most unlikely instruments to bring His will to pass teaching us to see that God works by hidden and normal means not only by miracles. In this opening chapter of the book we are still setting the scene for the main characters and events to take place. So far we have seen that the people of God, as they often are, find themselves in a situation of being a weak religious minority caught in the middle of the battle of the ages where the devil and his seed tries to wipe out the seed of the women. We have been introduced to the most powerful man in the world, who will be targeted by the devil to become a tool to wipe out the people of God. Now we will be introduced to his queen, Vashti. This marital spat in the highest places of power will be the backdrop for working out His perfect plan.

We will look at this section in two parts. Firstly, we want to walk through the text shedding light on the details; secondly, we will then draw the various lessons from the text.

The facts of the matter

V10-11, 'On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and 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 show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.' Our text opens reminding us that the wealthiest man in the world is throwing a 187 day party; and he is drunk. Now you and I are well aware of the sin and dangers of drunkenness. The Persians however did not share our concerns. In fact where today government officials would be looked upon with suspicion and criticism if they were drunk when entertaining foreign dignitaries, in the ancient world drunkenness was thought to bring one closer to the spiritual realm and get the influence of the gods in on any major decision. Politicking was done while drunk, and then the decisions evaluated the next day when everyone was sober to see if they still agreed. We know that Ahasuerus is throwing this party early on in his reign to impress upon his kingdom his power and wealth. As the party comes to its climactic end Ahasuerus was to crown this extravaganza dedicated to his own glory and power by display casing his trophy wife. So he calls upon his seven eunuchs and charges them all with the duty of presenting Vashti before them in her royal regalia. This was likely to be done with Vashti being brought in on a letter with all the fanfare. Eunuchs were generally castrated men entrusted with guarding and running a kings harem, and other business of the king.

Who is Vashti? Her name sounds like the Old Persian for desired/best. This has led scholars to see this more as a title than a name. If so this could be Amestris, the known wife of Ahasuerus. Amestris was no saint. History reveals that she was probably involved in the sacrificing of 14 children in a pagan ritual; as well as the dismembering and murdering of the mother of the woman that Ahasuerus had an affair with. You may have heard many a preacher say Vashti was required to come out wearing nothing but a crown. This was the way that the Rabbis read the text, but not the consensus among modern commentators. It is not impossible but it is an argument based on silence.

V12, '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.' Why did she refuse him? We are not told. Is it because he wanted her to appear naked? If this was Amestris she would have been heavily pregnant with Artaxerxes. Some have tried to make out that Vashti is being a bad wife and being unsubmitive, but the details of the text at least suggest that Ahasuerus is the one making an unreasonable request. Imagine the scene for yourselves. The king and all his male friends are drunk; the king wants his beautiful wife to appear in all her beauty so that all these drunk men can leer at her, it is not wonder that she refused.

The king we see is enraged and his anger burned within him. This is the king who had the men building his pontoon bridge to invade Greece beheaded because a storm delayed the building of it. This was the king who had the ocean whipped when a storm arose and destroyed the bridge. This is the king who threw shackles into the sea to symbolically bind it to punish it. Here is a man who does not have a very good reputation when it comes to anger, and we are told that he is angry. Here he is wanting to give that one last and greatest compliment to himself by parading the most beautiful of women before men that they might envy him, and he is denied. And he is done so publicly. Here he is proving to the world that he is the greatest and the strongest and even his own wife does not obey him.

V16-20, 'Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, ¹⁴ the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): ¹⁵ "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?" ¹⁶ Then Memucan 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 all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. ¹⁷ For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' ¹⁸ This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. ¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ 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." Instead of working out this marital spat privately Ahasuerus turns to his trusty

counsellors for aid, these princes were supposedly experts in law and judgement. The impression we get from this exchange is a bunch of yes men telling the king what they think he wants to hear. As we often feel whenever our wills are crossed, we need to hold a counsel to evaluate the shocking damage because our wills have not been done. The effects are no doubt of worldly proportions, the king is offended, every guest is offended, every household in the kingdom will now suffer because of this single denial of the king's will. The whole institution of marriage is coming to an end and every woman will now cast off her traditional role. The wisdom of the counsellors in making sure that this single act of a woman resisting an unreasonable demand does not end in open rebellion on the part of every woman is to publicize her act, make a martyr of her, and for a single understandable infraction remove her from her privileged position and any access to him forever. I think you are supposed to roll your eyes break out laughing in mockery because the text is certainly presenting them in a very poor light.

V21-22, 'This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. ²² 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.'

The lessons to be had

What do we take away from this section? There are some obvious moral failings which remind us of certain sins and their dangers, pointing us to biblical wisdom and a better way. But to read the OT merely looking for moral lessons is to have a Christless OT and without intending to, it ends up looking like Christless moralizing. So in looking at the lessons we want to do two things. Firstly, we will highlight the moral lessons to be learned because the folly and destructiveness of sin is so evident in the text. But secondly, we want to note the theological importance of this section and how it points to Christ.

So firstly, let us note the moral lessons from this section. A typical lesson derived from this section would be the sin of drunkenness and how drunkenness can be bad in affecting decision making and homelife. We must stress that this is not the main point of the text but it is an obvious reality in the text nonetheless. The Bible warns that Kings should not get drunk, Prov. 31:5, 'lest they drink and forget what has been decreed and pervert the rights of all the afflicted.' Contrary to Persian politics drunkenness does not make you wiser nor bring us closer to God, we have the Holy Spirit to enable our communion with God, Eph. 5:18, 'And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.' Drunkenness in marriage amplifies the sin of harsh communication, anger, criticisms, contempt, blaming and makes us less agreeable, more anxious and hypersensitive. It amplifies our marital sins of disinterest, self-absorption, neglect of ourselves, our children and our spouses. It affects sexual intimacy, making us less conscientious and unable to solve problems. It increases violence and abuse, emotional, verbal and physical. Sadly some Christians don't need to be alcoholics to have these sins amplified in their marriages, but the effect of the Spirit is to dampen and eradicate these sins. Alcohol leads you to abandon yourself to sin in self-destructive behaviour that hurts others as well, just think of drunk driving and the lack of love, thoughtfulness, the recklessness we pursue despite the consequences. This is not the point of Esther but still a point taken.

One commentator helpfully points out what this text illustrates about the way we sin. Like Ahasuerus who wanted to use Vashti to make himself look good, we use people to make ourselves look good. Like Ahasuerus we do not like to have our wills crossed, and in the irrationality and folly of our sins we double down and go from one bad decision to another. Ahasuerus was foolish to demand Vashti parade herself before his drunk companions; foolish for listening to dumb advice, and foolish for following their terrible advice. We are willing to believe all sorts of lies when they agree with our deluded opinions of ourselves. We all find those echo chambers that affirm us in our errors. When sinned against, even when we provoked the sin, we do not forgive, one strike and you are out. As we see a man who is self-absorbed; blind to his own errors; lashing out at everyone else for the mess he has caused, we see our desperate need for Christ. One of the great proofs of our sinfulness is the mess we leave in our sins. Think about all the hurt we have caused other people whether it is with words, or unfaithfulness, or bullying, or neglect, or abuse, or by using them, or by ingratitude, etc. It can be parents against children, children against parents, spouse against spouse, etc. We leave damage in our wake and others are often left with the consequences. We can run away, but these trainwrecks are monuments to our need for Christ. We are like the drowning person grabbing on to other people to save us only to pull them down with us, or they pull us down with them. We need a true Savior, who is Christ alone.

A wrong application of this text is the feminist reading. Some think that the whole point of the text is to portray Vashti as a warrior for women's rights. That she was a noble and sacrificial woman who refused to be objectified and stood against the patriarchy. The trouble with this reading, and many feminists have noted it, is that Esther then becomes a villain and part of the problem as she allows herself to be manipulated by Mordecai to become part of the harem of the king. The central message of Esther is not about woman's liberation. I think we can agree that an insecure chauvinism is clearly mocked; and self-absorbed husbands who order and expect unreasonable things from their wives are cast in a bad light, but women's rights are not the point of the text. As has been pointed out it is not that both Vashti and Esther are women; but that Vashti is a Gentile and Esther is a Jew is the most important thing to notice between these two women. A Gentile is removed and a Jew promoted all in order to save the Jews from Genocide.

The moral lessons around how marriages ought to be and Christ as the ideal king and husband overlap in this story. One of the major struggles for any exegete of the OT is how we can legitimately find Christ in the text. I like how one commentator put it saying that there are three main ways to find Christ in the text. Firstly, a text could be Christocentric, in other words the text is explicitly talking about Christ, Gen. 3:15, where Jesus is promised as the Seed of the woman is a clear example. Secondly, a text could be Christotelic. Telos is the Greek word for 'end.' In other words, the text is a puzzle piece that is building up to Christ being the climax or end of the big picture. Every chapter in the bible has a Christotelic aspect if not an explicit Christocentric one. The fact that the people of God are preserved to birth the Messiah is the Christotelic focus of the whole book of Esther. But a third way to find Christ in the text is a Christiconic way. The word 'icon' means image. Some texts through righteous or sinful behaviour remind us of Christ, or show our need for Christ by way of contrast. In this instance how a king treats his queen points us to how Christ treats His bride. Or any marriage can point us to Christ and His bride.

Husbands are called to love their wives as Christ loves the church by laying down His life for her; and wives are called to submit to their husbands as the church does to Christ. Compare then Ahasuerus to Christ as a husband and king. Ahasuerus demands obedience from his wife and commands her to do his will. For a single infraction against an unreasonable request she is essentially cast off. Compare that then with Christ, John 13:1-4, 'Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. ² During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, ³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, ⁴ rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist.' If we examine the instructions to husbands and wives in Eph. 5, that wives are to submit and husbands love, wives are told to submit first, but historically which comes first Christ laying down his life in love to make a bride, or His bride obeying His will? Christ loves us and serves us first and in response we as His bride delight in returning any love we have to the one who has served us so well. This is how it ought to be in marriage. We are advocates of male headship in marriage, but that does not mean ruling over your wife like Ahasuerus. Today we are seeing women running away from marriage in fear of men trying to control them in this fashion. Here is where we need to ensure that we stress the Christlike aspect of headship, the servant headship of Christ, the sacrificial headship of Christ, who serves His bride when she is undeserving, who goes to any lengths to meet her needs, who gives without conditions but upon the basis of grace. If husbands loved their wives and led their wives in the spirit of the way Christ has loved us, wives will gladly embrace the authority of their husbands. Ahasuerus reminds us of the terrible way in which male headship uninformed by Christlikeness can be a terrible thing.

The final application we want to make is to continue to talk about God's providence in this section. Here we have the people of God in a weak and vulnerable position and the powers of this world look wealthy and in control. But we see that through the selfishness of a bad king, and the disobedience of his wife, and the foolish counsel of his advisors, God opens a door for Esther. God is not the author of their sin; they are acting freely doing what they will to do; yet over it all God is sovereignly working out His purposes. For our purposes we must remember that the apparently random events like the marriage problems of rulers, or any instance of an apparently random event, that may seem to be unjust, or have nothing to do with us, with hindsight will prove to be in God's control. God's ways may be hidden but He is there overruling in it all.