

Sermon 3: Esther 2:1-11: Choosing a New Queen

OUTLINE

The humbled king's regrets
The humble queen's beginnings

INTRODUCTION

The beauty of the book of Esther is that we know how it ends. We already know the end from the beginning. It is like reading a detective novel the second time through and you can now see how all those apparently random events are essential parts to the unfolding plot. This is unlike how we live our own lives where the next step is a mystery. God has provided a book where the future of the people of God is hanging in the balance, total annihilation is the threat. We have a bunch of people who are not very impressive who seem to be pawns of the most powerful forces at the time making ambiguous decisions, and yet the will of God is done.

The book of Esther has begun with a selfish king who plays with people's lives and whose selfish whims impact on the lives of all around him. He has put on a party to impress in order to gain support for his invasion of Greece. The fragile illusion of control was shaken when his own wife refused his drunken demands, and she was cast off for her rebellion. Our story picks up with Ahasuerus returned from his humiliating defeat; and how he is manipulated by flattering advisors to set the ball in motion which will result in Esther being exalted to a place where she has save Israel. Today we will be looking at Ahasuerus choosing a new queen. We want to look at how he makes this choice, and secondly we want to see the introduction of our unlikely saviors in Mordecai and Esther, and how they come to be in the picture.

The humbled king's regrets

V1, '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.' Our text begins with the vague words, 'after these things.' What things? Ahasuerus is back from his failed invasion of Greece. Our text makes no mention of it, but it would have been so well known to the original audience that it needs no mention. Here is how one commentator talks of it: 'Xerxes' attack on Greece is one of the most famous military expeditions in world history. He is famous, or infamous, as the Persian king who led the unsuccessful invasion of Greece in 480 B.C., rendered memorable ever afterwards by the narrative of Herodotus in books 7 to 9 of his history. 'The army was indeed greater than any other in recorded history. There was not a nation in Asia that he did not take with him against Greece; save for the great rivers there was not a stream his army drank from that was not drunk dry. Some nations provided ships, others formed infantry units; from some cavalry was requisitioned, from others horse-transporters and crews; from others, again, warships for floating bridges, or provisions and naval craft of various kinds.'¹ But it failed.

1 Derek Prime, [*Unspoken Lessons About the Unseen God: Esther Simply Explained*](#), Welwyn Commentary Series (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2001), 41.

Imagine how he feels? Here is a freshly humbled man. He will be looking over the past, thinking about where the mistakes were that he made, who was to blame, what now?, and in the midst of this time of humiliation he thinks about Vashti. Pride comes before a fall, and Ahasuerus has fallen. His ego is crushed, the financial weight of his war would have been heavy, the many strains of a failed invasion would be upon him. These times of difficulty and humiliation are good for us as sinners because we need a reality check. It is often through dark times like these that our hearts are broken, our consciences are soft and we are more willing to see our need for God. The illusion of our strength and control is broken and now, maybe, we will call out to God.

With that in mind observe Ahasuerus's response to this set back. Firstly, note how Vashti's removal is put. 'He remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.' What is missing from this verse? What is missing is personal responsibility; he had escalated the matter, he had sought advice, and he had carried out the advice having her put away. During these times of brokenness you have a choice, see yourself as a victim and get angry with everyone else; or recognize your sins, own and confess them. Ahasuerus made a drunk, angry and rash decision and is not owning it. He is not owning the guilt and is having a pity party because he cannot have Vashti. Ahasuerus was sinful in being angry and is now seeing himself as the victim and not his sin. Does this sound familiar? We are so irrational and self-deceiving in our sin that we ruin a situation with our sin and then cry victim. This is why the words of Psalm 51:3-4 are so helpful, 'For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.' A true sign of repentance is owning our sin. Here he is sad because he cannot have what he wants. Instead of learning and growing and doing the right thing, he just mopes, allowing his sadness to dominate, he is broadcasting his irrational sadness and so much so that his staff volunteer solutions to try and cheer him up.

But it goes from bad to worse. V2-4, 'Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. ³ And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. ⁴ And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.' The king is not taking advice from his typical counsellors; perhaps he has come to distrust them. Traditionally the king would choose a wife from among the noble families. This has been suspected as feeding into the sort of counsel the princes and nobles originally gave to Ahasuerus, perhaps they secretly hoped he would replace Vashti with one of their own daughters, increasing their influence. The king instead accepts bad advice from his young men, advice which appeals to his pride and lust.

The bible warns of bad counsel. Rehoboam, Solomon's son is the key example. When the nation of Israel wanted tax breaks because Solomon's wealth had put a terrible demand upon the population. Rehoboam under the advice of his young friends doubled down flexing his newly acquired authority, and as a result split the kingdom. Or think of the opening verse of the psalms, 1:1, 'Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers.' I appreciated one of the commentators who stressed that we need to have an intergenerational influence in the decision

making of the life of our church. Only young men making the decision, you can imagine what sort of decision they will make.

The advice is despicable but in keeping with the harsh realities of the time that people are just property. It was advised that the most beautiful women in the whole kingdom be brought to Ahasuerus that he could decide which one would be his next queen. We are told that this pleased the king and he did so. Here is a man who has a rare opportunity to learn from his losses, to take stock and go in a better direction. A wise counsellor could use these failures to gently guide him in the right direction, but what does he opt for? He drowns his sense of guilt and failure in lust. We can see that his sense of guilt is shallow and he is easily diverted. Sadly, he follows the path that we so often follow. When we are feeling down because of our own failures and feeling sorry for ourselves, we take sin as a solution and a balm to try and fix the ache we feel inside. It makes us angry when we see someone with so much power being so selfish, but we are just the same, we just don't rule kingdoms like Ahasuerus.

We cannot help but compare this king with the King of Kings. This terrible king whose bouts of anger and self-pity make a for an unpredictable ruler. His subjects would fear when he might have a tantrum and they would be its victims. On top of this it is very clear that this selfish ruler is easily manipulated. Appeals to pride and lust and a sense of entitlement are heard and this man who is supposed to rule is ruled by those who are skilled manipulators. The tragedy is that many lives are in his hands. We need a better king, we need Christ. He is holy and good and just and not subject to whim and bouts of selfishness. Nor is He a fickle king driven by lust. Christ did not seek out His bride from among the most beautiful and worthy in this world. Rather, this glorious God and King, humbled Himself in His search and rescue of us. He took us from the mud of our sins; from the prison of our desires; from the enslavement to the devil; from the tyranny of death; from death row itself, taking an ugly, unworthy, criminal who had prostituted herself and paid for her release at cost to His own life, finally marrying her to Himself. Ahasuerus is a humbled king Christ is the humble King.

The humble queen's beginnings

V5-7, 'Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, ⁶ who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. ⁷ He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.' We come now to Mordecai and Esther. Our text opens by stressing that Mordecai is a Jew before it tells us his name; that he is in exile in Susa. Mordecai is the Hebrew version of the Babylonian name which means follower of Marduk a Babylonian god. Like Daniel and his friends he as a Jew had a pagan name. Whether he had a Jewish name at all we are not told. His heritage is highlighted for us. He is a Benjamite, the same tribe as King Saul. Here are nearly 120 years after the exile into Babylon. The question is raised, what is he doing here. The Jews were given permission to return to Israel, Ezra 1:2-3; but it seems that many Jews were too comfortable in their lives in exile and refused to return. Mordecai's descendants made that choice for him, and here he is an integrated Jew in many ways.

Then there is Esther. We are told her Jewish name is Hadassah which means myrtle. The myrtle tree has connotations of hope and restoration after exile. It was used as a building material in the feast of booths; and there are various promises in the prophets that link the blooming of the myrtle with restoration, Is. 41:19; 55:13; Zech. 1:10-11. She had a second Persian name, Esther. This could mean star after the shape of the myrtle flower, some have taken it to be a version of Ishtar the goddess of love and war. It has been pointed out that this girl with two name has two identities that she is negotiating as a Jew in exile. We are told that she is an orphan and is being raised by Mordecai as a family member.

Now we are told that Esther is beautiful which prepares us to see that she will be swept up in Ahasuerus's search for a new queen. V8-11, '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 in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. ⁹ And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her 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. ¹⁰ Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. ¹¹ And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.'

Josephus reckons that about 400 young women qualified for the finals in this quest for a new queen. It should not be given the respectable name of a beauty competition because these young women were put into the house of women, and there they would stay for the rest of their lives. Now this was atypical in terms of how a king would find his wife; ordinarily he would take one from among the nobility, but perhaps Ahasuerus did not trust them because of how they used him to oust Vashti, and maybe for personal advantage. Some of these women might have thought that the opportunity was a privilege and would happily be kept women living in luxury. This no doubt violates our modern sensibilities. And we must not think that the girls alone were victims, apparently, the king castrated 500 boys a year to serve in the royal palaces.

The question is raised, how could Mordecai and Esther have willingly participated in such an event. 'The fifteenth-century Jewish commentator Abraham Saba writes: 'Now when Mordecai heard the king's herald announcing that whoever had a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to have intercourse with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass?... He should have been killed rather than submit to such an act.... Why did Mordecai not keep righteous Esther from idol worship? Why was he not more careful? Where was his righteousness, his piety, and his valor?... She [Esther] too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to have intercourse with him [Xerxes].'² The text does not comment on the internal motives of either. And so the question of how we are to live as exiles is thrust upon us as we read this text.

My personal take on Esther is that both Mordecai and Esther were very comfortable and integrated in their lives in Persian society. Their Jewishness was

2 Karen H. Jobes, [Esther](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 101.

peripheral and even a shameful thing that they kept hidden. Many have tried to rescue Mordecai and Esther by saying that maybe there was known prejudice and it was wise to do so. There is an instinct in us to rescue bible characters from a bad reputation because we are so used to read them looking to them for moral lessons and holding them up as heroes. My impression is that both Mordecai and Esther grow in their faith and obedience. They begin integrated and unrecognizable as the people of God at the beginning, but as stands need to be taken, as persecution ensues, personal position and even their lives are willingly risked in obedience to God in preserving His people.

It has been pointed out where we have preached sermons on 'Dare to be a Daniel', no one at this point would preach a sermon on 'Dare to be an Esther,' at least not yet. Daniel stood up for his God; lived life in exile in accordance with the law; did not hide his allegiances, but Esther submitted and hid. We can relate to them can't we. Hide your witness, don't let your light shine. Christ has called us to let our light shine. Or make compromises to get ahead in the world. Living in exile and acclimatized to the values of generations of Jews who had succumbed to the culture around them, they were not being holy as God is holy. They were being swept up in what was going on around them, not distinguishing themselves from the world.

We are using Esther to think more deeply on the sovereignty of God and see examples of how it works out in our own lives. The introduction of our main characters through whom God will save His people is underwhelming; we have all sorts of questions about their worthiness. But this is part of the lesson we must learn. God we know used the selfishness and vanity of a narcissistic king to make room for Esther. Now we see that He is also able to use the half-hearted and lukewarm decisions that we make which get us into hot water. Just as God does not approve of the sins of unbelievers, God hates the sin in believers just as much. The sin always comes from our hearts not Him, He is not the author of salvation. Yet when flesh fails to fulfil what we expect, God's plans are stronger than the weakest link that He employs in bringing His plan to pass. Both sinful king and sinful saint fall within God's power to bring His will to pass. This does not make excuses to sin but to pursue holiness and keep trusting despite the sin we see prospering in society around us, in those in power, and even in ourselves and other Christians.