

A Queen's Fall and Rise

Esther 1 - 2:18; November 1, 2020

Connect:

- I'm humbled and honored to be able to bring God's Word to you today. This is my first time preaching since returning from my sabbatical...so I may have to shake off some of the rust.
- But I do have at least one thing going for me. Everyone got an extra hour of sleep last night and so you should be ready to lock in with me.

Intro the New Sermon Series:

- Today we're kicking off a new sermon series going through the OT book called "Esther." Go ahead and find it in your Bible. It's after Ezra and Nehemiah and comes right before Job and Psalms. Don't feel bad looking at the table of contents in the front of your Bible to help you find the page number.
- My goal is that by the end of this sermon, you'll have a decent grasp of the main direction of this book, understanding where it fits in the larger picture of God's story and seeing how it's personally relevant for us.

Here's *why* we need to hear what God has to say to us through Esther. As we go through this book, we're going to get answers to some key questions that we all wrestle with:

- How do we live faithfully in a world that is so hostile to God?
- How do we keep walking with God when we don't see Him at work in our lives?

Esther is going to help us wrestle through and answer these questions and many more. Plus, it has all of the ingredients that you look for in a great story: a beautiful and courageous hero, an evil villain, romance, suspense, irony and many great twists, turns and reversals...along with a happy ending :). No tissues needed.

Let's jump into to the text and begin to see all that God has for us in this book.

I. The Setting of Esther (1:1-8).

Read Esther 1:1-3a.

"Now in the days..."

- The book starts by setting the context for the story that is to follow.
- While we're not told anywhere who the author is, it's clear that the author intends for us to read this story as events that actually happened in history.

The 1st Main Character: King Ahasuerus (pronounced: A-haz-you-eras).

- He is better known in history by his Greek name, Xerxes.
- History tells us that he was 32 years old when he began to reign and he reigned as king from 486 - 465 BC.

- He reigned from “India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces.”
 - This is modern day Pakistan to northern Sudan.
 - Show Map
 - In other words, the Persian Empire was *the* empire of the day.
- He reigned from Susa, which was the capital city (this is modern day Shush, Iran).
 - When you see the word “citadel” in the text, this is referring to the palace complex.
- The story begins in the 3rd year of his reign.

This is enough information now to figure out how Esther fits into the larger story of God’s plan of redemption.

- Let’s zoom out for a second.

The Six Act Drama of Scripture (show image)

- Act 1. God’s Kingdom Established in **Creation** (Genesis 1-2).
 - The people of God in the presence of God enjoying the blessing and rest of God.
- Act 2. Rebellion in the Kingdom at the **Fall** (Genesis 3).
 - God’s people reject God as king and are separated from his presence and face his curse. But God offers a ray of hope by promising to crush the serpent through the offspring of the woman.
- Act 3. The King Chooses **Israel**, *Initiating Redemption*
 - God chooses Abraham and makes a covenant with him to bring blessing to the nations through him. This passes to Isaac, Jacob (who’s name is changed to Israel), and then the lion of the tribe of Judah (one of Jacob’s 12 sons).
 - God raises up Moses to bring Israel to the edge of the promised land and then Joshua leads them into the land.
 - The people anoint Saul as King and then God raises up David as king and makes a covenant with him. A temple is built Solomon reigns as a great king until his fall. After Solomon, Israel begins a swift decline. The kingdom is divided and then eventually both the northern and southern kingdoms are exiled.
 - The Northern Kingdom (Israel) was exiled in 722 BC
 - The Southern Kingdom (Judah) was exiled in 597 BC
 - Read 1 Kings 9 for the background behind the exile.
- King Ahasuerus’ reign: 486 - 465 BC
 - This is 100 years after the southern kingdom was exiled
 - The Jews are now a minority group scattered among the nations. They have no king, no army and no land.
 - Additionally, a powerful leader (Hama) is plotting to virtually annihilate all of the Jewish people.
 - The exile was God’s punishment on Israel but he never intended to destroy them completely.
- This raises a theological question: what about God’s promises to his covenant people Israel?
 - The book of Esther answers the question: “How is it that the Jews are still here?”

It's a story about the providence and faithfulness of God to fulfill his covenant promises.

- In the Hebrew Bible, Esther is paired with four other "festal scrolls" (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes) in what is called the *Megillot*.
- To this day, Jews celebrate the feast of *Purim* (it is normally celebrated on only one day, the fourteenth of Adar, in February/March, preceded by a day of fasting), which was commanded in Esther 9:28 to be celebrated by all future generations as a way to commemorate the saving of the Jewish people as recounted in this book.

Read Esther 1:3-8.

Feast #1: 180 days (ca 6 months)

- The text doesn't tell us why he was throwing a feast but historical sources tell us that he is about to invade Greece (show the map again).
- Given this, he's throwing a feast to build support and loyalty across the entire empire for this invasion of Greece. This is why he's invited officials, servants, military leaders, nobles, and governors of provinces.
- "There is no compulsion" means that the king set aside the custom that everyone had to drink whenever the king drank.

Feast #2: 7 days

- This last feast was probably focused primarily on the residents of Susa, as they would have been the ones who provided many of the services demanded by the lavish hospitality of the previous 180 days.

Summary:

- The king's wealth and power is on display and we are meant to be in awe. The description of his palace would've reminded the readers of the glory of the temple.
- He lavishes it on whomever he chooses and is showing that he will reward those who remain loyal and obedient to him.
- There's implicit irony here as well that the original readers would've picked up on:
 - He doesn't win the battle four years later against Greece and instead much of his wealth is depleted.
 - The king's fortunes are going to be reversed and this foreshadows other reversals still to come.

Read Esther 1:9-12.

II. The Fall of Queen Vashti (1:9-22).

The 2nd Main Character: The Queen, which is Vashti, for now.

- Additionally, Vashti threw a feast for the women of the palace.
- The larger story is how King Ahasuerus wants to show off and parade Queen Vashti in front of the everyone. As Karen Jobes notes, "The beautiful Vashti, wearing her royal

diadem, was a living trophy of his power and glory.”

- The king sends 7 eunuchs (castrated men who served in the royal harem) to bring Vashti in, perhaps even carrying her while she sits on a royal throne.
- I guess the king thought her appearance would further inspire patriotism and support.

Sidebar: Focus on Appearances

- The focus on external appearances, is just like our day.
- As one commentator notes, “Men are measured by wealth and power, women by beauty and sexuality” (Bethany Jenkins). Or as Tim Keller notes, “a man by the size of his wallet and a woman by the size of her dress.”
- The world tells us to judge others by external measures. *What* we have or *what* we look like is more important than *who* we are.

Vashti’s Refusal:

- But Queen Vashti refuses to come at the king’s command.
- We’re not told why she refused or whether her refusal was noble or rebellious; right or wrong.
- This must be intentional by the author and we’re going to see this again and again throughout Esther. Actions and motives by the main characters are often ambiguous.
- This is queuing us into how we’re to interpret Esther (or not interpret Esther). As Karen Jobes notes, the ambiguity is not a “problem to be overcome in order to interpret the text, but...[is] part of the literary fabric of the story.” She continues, “It is natural for a reader to decide whether he or she likes or dislikes a character in a story... [But] an exemplary approach produces an inadequate interpretation of this story.”
 - Examples of an exemplary approach:
 - Don’t get drunk like the king or you’ll make bad decision.
 - Don’t be a rebellious wife like Vashti or you’ll destroy your marriage.

Read Esther 1:12-22.

The King’s Response:

- This is complete irony and a little humorous: while the king is showing off his power, he can’t even control his own wife.
- As you can imagine, this was extremely embarrassing for the king, which explains why he burned with anger.
- So the king turns to his inner circle of seven advisors, “wise men who knew the times,” for marriage advice (vv. 13-14).
- Memucan becomes the voice of these advisors
 - He further widens the scope of Vashti’s refusal saying she has done wrong to “all the officials and all the peoples” (v. 16) because now all the wives of the kingdom are going to follow her example (v. 17-18) and then there will be exponential “contempt” and “wrath” (v. 18). He’s painting a total breakdown of the proper domestic order.
 - He proposes that a royal order should be sent out that forbids Vashti from the

king's presence and that another "who is better," or "more obedient," should take her place (v. 19).

- As a result, when women all over the empire see the consequences that Vashti faced for her disrespect, then they will respect their husbands.

Sidebar: this is not a biblical view of marriage

- What's being proposed here is a very low view of marriage, a relationship founded on coercion. This is not the way God intended for husbands and wives to interact.
- As one commentator notes, "...if a man has to command a woman to respect him, then whatever 'respect' is so rendered loses its meaning" (Jobes).
- Men, we don't demand respect. We earn it by displaying the sacrificial love of Jesus (cf. Eph. 5:22-33). Jesus says that true greatness is found in the one who lays down his life and serves (Matt. 20:25-28).
- In fact, I'll expand this: anyone who is in a position of power and authority (parents, CG leaders, ministry directors, CEO's, department heads, etc.) should strive to be worthy of that power and authority that you have and to use it exemplifying the character of Jesus with great humility, servanthood and grace.

Vashti's Fall:

- So, the decree goes out and the queen is stripped of her position and for the first time in Esther she's simply referred to as "Vashti" (v. 19) instead of "Queen Vashti." While the text doesn't make it explicit, divorce is what is implied along with the end of her queenship.
- We're not told whether this decree was effective or not across the entire empire.
- Ironically, now not just the people in Susa know about the king's embarrassing situation, the entire empire knows about it.

What have we learned so far? What does the author want us to get?

- The author has painted a picture of what life is like in the Persian palace and this provides the context for us to understand events that are still to come:
 - The king has absolute power and wealth and he will use it to do whatever he wants to do (often from wrong motives and with impaired judgment) with little or no regard for its impact on others. No one is safe from his power, not even his own wife.
 - This makes us long for God to provide the perfect king, a king with perfect character who will bring true justice for all.
 - The story of the queen's fall prepares us for the story of Esther's rise as queen, which we'll see shortly.
 - The odds are stacked against Esther and Mordecai and the Jewish people. How will Esther fair any better than Vashti, especially given the fact that she's a Jew? How will she gain the king's favor?

Read Esther 2:1-4.

III. The Rise of Queen Esther (2:1-18).

The Plan for the next Queen (2:1-4)

- Roughly four years had passed between the events of chapter 1 and chapter 2 (see 2:16).
 - He's back now as a defeated king from this battle with Greece.
- These verses reveal the plans for how King Ahasuerus will find his next queen.
- The king's advisors are now proposing to basically hold a beauty pageant to find the next queen or something akin to the *Bachelor*. Young virgins were to be gathered and brought to the *harem* in Susa.
 - A *harem* was a separate part of the palace where others were housed, typically used for women.
- Hegai, the king's eunuch, would oversee them.
- The winner, the one who "pleases the king" will be the next queen.
- We're going to see increasing moral ambiguity in this chapter, as the author does not give us any moral judgments on what's happening.
 - We're not told whether these women participated consensually or not...but here again we see the brutal power of the king on display.
 - As one commentator notes, "Everyone, whether male or female, was at the disposal of the king's personal whims" (Jobes).

Read Esther 2:5-7.

The 3rd Main Character: Mordecai

- He was a Jew who lived in Susa.
- He was a Benjaminite, which links him to King Saul (who lived 500 years earlier).
- His great grandfather, Kish, was carried away from Jerusalem during the time of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, when Jeconiah was King of Judah.
 - Jeconiah = Jehoiachin, the second-to-last king of Judah.
 - He was deported to Babylon in 597 BC (cf. 2 Kings 24:10-15), 114 years before the present events.
 - The author is connecting Mordecai with the exile out of the Promised Land and this explains how it is that a Jew is living in Susa.

The New 2nd Main Character: Esther, the future Queen

- Esther ("star") is her Persian name but her Hebrew name is Hadassah ("myrtle").
- Esther is Mordecai's cousin.
- Her father and mother had already died so Mordecai had adopted her.
- We're told she "had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at," a phrase similar to how Vashti was described (1:11).
- The author is already aligning Esther with Vashti and the upcoming beauty pageant planned by the king.
- The fact that the author mentions both of Esther's names hints that she is a woman with two identities, a conflict which we'll see played out later along with a transformation where we'll see these identities merged.

Read Esther 2:8-9.

- “Many” women were gathered and brought to the king’s palace in Susa.
- It’s unclear whether these women went willingly or not. Though, given that it was an order of the king, these ladies probably had no choice in the matter.
- Again, we’re not given any insight into these women’s own personal opinions about their experiences and circumstances.
- What we are told is that Esther won the favor of Hegai, so she must have been fully compliant once she got there. As a result, he provided her with the finest of everything and she was promoted to the best place in the harem.
- In other words, she has made it to the finals.

Read Esther 2:10-11.

- Esther had yet to reveal her Jewish identity because Mordecai had told her not to.
- We’re not told any motivations except that it was Mordecai’s decision for her to remain silent.
 - Given the anti-Semitism that we’re going to see rise in chapter 3, Mordecai probably feared what might happen if her Jewish identity was revealed.
- What is very clear is that Mordecai really cared for Esther as can be seen by his daily travel to the court of the harem.
- This raises a number of questions for us:
 - Is Esther being faithful to God’s law? Daniel and his friends clearly protested against the king...why not Esther?
 - Are her motives pure?
 - What about Mordecai’s motives? Is his advice consistent with godly counsel?
- This wisdom from Scholar Karen Jobes is so helpful: “The divinely inspired author chose not to reveal Esther’s reaction to being taken into the harem or Mordecai’s motives for commanding Esther to conceal her identity. It is natural to pass judgment on these two, whether positive or negative, but in doing so we may miss an important point. The deliberate silence is part of the message.”

Read Esther 2:12-14.

- How about this beautification plan?
 - 6 months with oil of myrrh, a very expensive perfume.
 - 6 months with spices and ointments.
 - The king went all out preparing these women for their one night with him.
- Afterwards, each lady got one evening with the king and she could take whatever she wanted with her to the king for this night (jewelry, clothing, potions, etc.).
 - This first night was her initiation as a concubine.
 - This is clearly not aligned with a biblical sexual ethic where sex is to be reserved

and enjoyed between a husband and wife.

- These women were being used and exploited at the sole pleasure of the king.
- This again reinforces what we've already seen: the king had absolute power and it would prove costly for any woman to exert her independence. The odds are not in Esther's favor.
- After her night with the king, she would return to the harem where she could not leave to marry or return to her family. These women would not even see the king again, unless he asked for them by name.

Read Esther 2:15-18.

- The text continues to emphasize how Esther "won favor" in the eyes of the people (2:15) and especially the king (2:17). But, we're not told *how* she won this favor. We assume that she did whatever it took to please the king.
- In fact, the passive voice used throughout suggests things were happening to grant her favor that were outside of her control.
- As a result, the king makes Esther queen, a great reversal. The story begins with a queen absent at a feast and it ends with a feast being thrown for a new queen.
- The author avoids "marriage" language but that is what has happened. The Jewish Esther has married the Gentile King Ahasuerus.
 - This is at the very same time when marriage between Jews and Gentiles was an issue (see Ezra 9:12; 10:10ff).
- Again, the author does not tell us anything about how Esther thought about all of this.
 - Perhaps she hated this situation with all of her heart and felt completely violated.
 - On the other hand, perhaps she loved the attention she got from the most powerful man in the world, including the sensuality of it. Perhaps the bachelor king swept her off of her feet.
- If we try to take an exemplary approach to interpreting this book, our only hope is taking a guess at these questions.
- The author is intentionally silent on these questions because the main characters are not being held up as examples to follow. That's not the primary point.
- So then what is the point and how are we supposed to interpret and understand this text?

Conclusion: The 4th Main Character: the Invisibly Present God

- Has it crossed your mind yet that God hasn't been mentioned anywhere yet. In fact, there's no explicit mention of God or even an allusion to God in the entire book.
- In light of this, some have suggested that this book shouldn't even be in the Bible. That's not the best solution.
- Rather, we should ask: what is the author up to? Why has the author done this?
- This is it: even when God is most hidden and invisible, he is still present and working to fulfill his promises and plan.

The Point: Trust the invisibly present God who is providentially fulfilling his promises and plan.

- The author wants us to see that undergirding the character’s actions, motives or even faithfulness to God’s law, is the providence of God.
 - He is providentially working behind the scenes to fulfill the promises he made to his covenant people long ago.
 - He is infinitely more powerful than King Ahasuerus and the entire Persian Empire.
- If you have eyes to see, you’ll see God all over this book. His imprint is everywhere. As one commentator notes, “He is the unseen force behind every apparent coincidence” (New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, *Esther*).
 - God is the reason that Esther gains favor with the king (cf. 2:9, 15, 17).
- Why doesn’t the author tell us that God is at work?
 - It’s because this is the way most of us experience God. Most of us don’t experience God through a burning bush, a parting of the Red Sea, a resurrection from the dead. Rather, we experience God at work everywhere in our lives through ordinary events.
 - Where you live, the people you know, the jobs you have, the experiences you go through - these are not coincidences. God is at work.
 - God, how are you at work?
 - What are you trying to teach me?
 - How do you want to use me?
- God continues to work providentially through everything we face in life.
 - This is what Romans 8:28 teaches us:

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. (Rom. 8:28 ESV)

- One commentator even says that *Esther* is “a practical demonstration of Romans 8:28” (New Dictionary of Biblical Theology, *Esther*).
- Think about the implications of this truth: regardless of whether Esther and Mordecai always had the right motives or made the best decision, as Karen Jobes notes, “God was working through their imperfect decisions and actions to fulfill his purposes.”
- And you and I are no different from them. While we should strive to the best of our ability to do our best to honor God in every situation of life, God can use even our failures to providentially fulfill his plan for us.
 - Covid-19 isn’t derailing the plans and promises.
 - No matter what happens with the Election on Tuesday (and we should do our best to honor God in how we vote), God is providentially working to fulfill his promises and plan.
 - My hope is not in the government or any political party of the US, my hope and trust is in the perfect, all-knowing, all-powerful, all-wise, compassionate King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

- Kings and presidents may make secular decisions with no thought to God, but make no mistake, God is at work and nothing can thwart his plan and his promises to us in Christ.
 - You can trust him.
- Implications for Jesus and the Gospel
 - Jesus is the ultimate offspring of Gen. 3:15. As a result of God providentially saving the Jews, he paves the way for Jesus. And as we look at Jesus hanging on a cross, we could be tempted to think that God had abandoned him and was completely silent. Yet, we know nothing could be further from the truth. His death was not a detour but was part the providence of God to save us (see Acts 2).
 - Turn to Jesus, the perfect, king of kings, and trust him for salvation today.