

Series The Story of Esther

This Message #2

Scripture Esther 2:1-23

The events in the story of Esther unfold in an interesting literary style, similar to some modern novels and films. For example, the reader is introduced to the main characters one at a time, in the context of their life situations. At first the characters and their circumstances do not appear to have any relation to each other, but as the story unfolds, their lives become interwoven in a complex way.

In the first chapter, we learned about the activities of King Xerxes. Imagine how chapter 1 would be depicted in a movie. The opening scene would reveal a large group of people meandering through the gardens of a palace admiring the lavish decorations. The scene would then shift to a large room inside the palace where many men would be sitting at a sumptuous banquet table. At the center of the table, on a raised dais, would be seated the king. Enthralled guests from the city of Susa would be toasting him and flattering him with their compliments.

From time to time, the king would call everyone's attention to some unique example of his wealth and splendor. He was taking great pleasure in showing off and dazzling his guests with the opulence of his palace. And in an impulsive moment of male vanity, he decided to show off another beautiful object, his royal consort, the queen.

In our mind's eye, we now shift to the eunuchs who were responsible to bear the king's command to the queen. They are hurrying into the women's section of the palace to the Queen's chambers. Then we see the reaction of the Queen to the demand of the king. She is indignant and says, "No." She will not leave the women's quarters in order to put herself on display before the men of Susa just to satisfy the chauvinistic vanity of her husband, the king.

When this was reported back to the king, he became furious. Her disobedience was a public embarrassment to him, and also a direct challenge to his authority. That was something that could not be condoned. As a result of her refusal to appear before the king in the banquet hall, Vashti was removed from her position.

That was the dramatic background of chapter 1. Now we are ready for chapter 2

Read 2:1-18

In chapter 2 the writer introduces us to two more of the main characters. The first is a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, whose name was Mordecai. *[Note: Mordecai was the Hebrew pronunciation of a Gentile name. It was not uncommon for exiled Jews to have two names, one Hebrew, and another, Gentile (see, for examples, Daniel 1:6-7 and Genesis 41:45).]*

The lineage and background of Mordecai is given in verses 5-6. It is not known if Shimei and Kish were distant or immediate ancestors. If Kish was his distant ancestor, then it would mean that Mordecai was in the family line of King Saul, who was also a Benjamite, and the son of Kish — a man who lived 500 years previously. It is also possible that Shimei and Kish were among those exiles who had been taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, in 597 BC, along with Jehoiachin, the king of Judah. If this was the case, then Mordecai would be a third generation exile.

By calling attention to the genealogy of Mordecai, the writer is getting us ready to understand the hatred which will develop toward Mordecai and the Jewish people. The evil enemy of the Jews will be introduced in the next chapter.

The second main character introduced to us in chapter 2 is Hadassah, the cousin of Mordecai. Her Gentile name was Esther. We are informed that she was an orphan, raised under the guardianship of Mordecai, and that she was “lovely in form and features.”

Now that we know the background of these two main characters, we need to think about their place in the story. We learn this from two very important episodes which are described in chapter 2. The first concerns the elevation of Esther to the position of royal queen.

Vashti was deposed as queen in 483 BC, during the time Xerxes was preparing for war against the Greeks. The war began in 480 BC with an army of nearly two hundred thousand men and a navy of several hundred ships. In spite of the extensive preparations and large number of fighting men, the forces of Persia were soundly defeated in both the naval and land battles. According to historians, after these military defeats Xerxes had no more ambitions to expand his empire internationally. He returned to his homeland and spent the remainder of his life on domestic building programs in Susa and Persepolis. It was after his return to his home that he had time to reflect on the fact that he had no royal consort.

What was he to do about this? We are informed in verse 2 that the king's personal attendants proposed a beauty contest. The girl who pleased the king would become the new queen. Beautiful young virgins were brought into the harem in Susa from all over the empire. The fact that the women were "brought" into the harem, rather than "invited," implies that participation in the contest was not voluntary. The Jewish historian Josephus wrote that four hundred virgins were rounded up and brought to Susa. Esther was among those compelled to come.

Esther spent a year in preparation for her night with the king. She was provided with beauty treatments and special food. She was made ready to do one thing - satisfy the unrestrained sensual desires of a powerful pagan (and depressed) king. Esther was taken to King Xerxes in the seventh year of his reign. Verse 17 informs us that he was attracted to her more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen.

We are not given any information about the emotional attitude of Esther during this year leading up to her designation as queen. The description about her life is told in this story in a detached, dispassionate way. We are left to wonder: Did she want to be queen? Had she been fearful about the outcome? Given her Jewish background, did she have any disquieting thoughts about what she had to do?

She had been compelled to participate in the contest, but should she have, as a Jewess, willingly submitted herself to pagan practices? The Scriptures clearly taught that a Jewess must not marry a pagan uncircumcised Gentile (*Deuteronomy 7:1-4*), or have sexual relationships with a man who was not her husband (*Exodus 20:14*), or eat food which was ceremonially unclean (*Leviticus 11:46-47*). Esther was guilty of violating all three of these Old Testament laws. Furthermore, she had hidden her ethnicity. She did not act like one of God's chosen people.

And given the reputation of Xerxes, I can't imagine that any young woman would aspire to be his consort. His violent temper and womanizing behavior was legendary. Let me give you an example of his temper. In his preparations for battle against the Greeks, he ordered his troops to build bridges across a waterway. The builders were successful, but shortly after the work was completed, a storm arose and the sea waves shattered all the work. Xerxes flew into a rage at this, and commanded that the sea be scourged with 300 strokes of a whip, that curses be pronounced against the water, and when that was done, he ordered that all the bridge builders be beheaded. He was, at times, irrational and cruel.

In regard to his sensual appetites, Xerxes would definitely not be considered a candidate for "husband of the year." There was a steady stream of virgins at his disposal. As verse 14 indicates, in the evening one of them would go from the area of the harem where the virgins were prepared to meet the king, and then in the morning move to another part of the harem, the section for women who had lost their virginity. A woman who had slept once with the king could not return to him unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. Once in the part of the harem reserved for concubines, the women might have to live as widows for the rest of their lives. That had been the potential future of Esther. I can't imagine her going to the king with a lot of confidence about the outcome.

Yet it turned out that this orphan of Jewish exiles — who had been raised by her cousin in a foreign land; blessed with unique comeliness; forced by the king's edict into a kind of sexual slavery; yet finding favor with everyone with whom she came in contact, including the king himself — was honored with the position of queen of the empire. Within one year she had moved from obscurity in the house of Mordecai to the status of royalty.

None of the advancements in her life were just coincidental. A sincere reader of Scripture does not accept “chance” and “good fortune” as a doctrine in life. This story is about God at work. God knew what the future would hold, and that His chosen people would soon be in great danger, and He was putting selected individuals in places so that He could take care of His people when their crisis arrived.

Scripture indicates that God can turn the arbitrary, foolish, lustful, and evil behaviors of powerful people to accomplish His purposes. A commentator named Thomas Watson wrote, “God might have a hand in the action where sin is, but He never has His hand in the sin of the action.”

The Psalmist wrote, “No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt a man. But it is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another” (*Psalms 75:6-7*). And there is a Proverb which states, “The heart of the king is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases” (*Proverbs 21:1*). Xerxes did not know the true God of heaven, but he made choices that fit into the purposes of God, and one of them was the selection of Esther to be the queen.

There is one more episode we need to read about today — one more element in the plot that will prove to be crucial to the outcome.

Read Esther 2:19-23

This development in the story puts Mordecai in a position in which the king owes him a favor. This favor will be repaid at a crucial time in the future when the fate of the Jews hangs in the balance. This is another instance in which God uses human activity for His purposes.

Mordecai stayed in close proximity to the palace in order to stay informed of the circumstances of Esther. Verses 10 and 11 are similar to verses 19 and 20. While Esther was in her year of preparations, he paced back and forth near the courtyard of the harem of the virgins. Later, after Esther was moved into her own quarters in the inner harem, he sat by the king’s gate. The gate of a city or, in this case, the king’s palace, would be the location for governmental, commercial, and legal activities. Public pronouncements would first be made known at the palace gate. Men would gather at the gate to trade their merchandise. Respected elders would be present to arbitrate disputes that were brought to their attention.

The meaning of verse 19 is unknown. Neither is it known when this event occurred. It probably occurred months after Esther's selection as queen. It was known that Xerxes periodically updated and replenished his harem. Just because there was an official queen did not mean that the king was ready to follow a monogamous lifestyle. The harem areas of the palace were rather extensive, and powerful kings often had large numbers of concubines. *[Even Solomon, king of Israel, was reported to have had 700 wives and 300 concubines! See I Kings 11:3]*

During one of the times that Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, he either overheard or was informed about the conspiracy of two of the king's officials to assassinate King Xerxes. When the plan became known to Mordecai, he told Queen Esther, and she informed the king, giving the credit to Mordecai. When the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were executed.

One of the things we know about kings is that they all lived in fear of attempts on their lives. Historical records indicate that the Persian kings tried to surround themselves with trustworthy guards, but conspiracies and power struggles were common. *[In fact, Xerxes' life ended when he was assassinated in his bedroom about twelve years after Esther became queen.]*

The last verse in chapter 2 indicates that the event was recorded in the "book of the annals," which were official court records of memorable events. There is no information that the king rewarded Mordecai for his intervention. The neglect of this matter becomes another of the seemingly unconnected events which will become important in the story at a later time. The apparent injustice to Mordecai at this time will later result in benefit to the Jewish people and to the glory of God.

I hope you are beginning to recognize that God was working silently in every aspect of this story. His invisibility was not a limit on His invincibility and sovereign control of human circumstances. Before the end of this story, we will discover that God does a masterful job of weaving together many individual seemingly insignificant threads.

Additional thoughts

Despite the attempts of many commentators to promote Esther as an example of godly character we should not be so quick to assume this. There should have been no opt out from the laws of God in exile, as Daniel proved. Deffinbaugh points out, “Why are we happy to see Esther on the throne, even though she has misrepresented her nationality and kin, is living outside the promised land, and is married to a heathen king, the winner of a contest which included sleeping with the king?”

Ezra and Nehemiah are the accounts of the godly Jews who returned to the promised land and who sought to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple amidst great difficulty and opposition. Esther, on the other hand, is an account of those who became too attached to the land of their sojournings and thus disobeyed God by not returning when it was not only allowed, but commanded. It is in the light of the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures that we can see the Book of Esther for what it is and appreciate its unique message and contribution. While Ezra and Nehemiah focus on the return to the land by the faithful remnant, Esther depicts the fate of those who remain in the land of their captivity. We should not expect Mordecai and Esther to be godly Jews, for they are living in disobedience. No wonder there is no mention of God, and no wonder that Esther’s Persian name is the name of a heathen Goddess, Ishtar.

Why has God inspired and preserved this book as a part of the Old Testament canon? What does it have to say to us? First, it is a warning to those of us who live our lives not as “strangers and pilgrims,” but as citizens of an earthly realm, as mere worldlings (see 1 Peter 1:1ff.). Second, it warns us not to forget where our real “home” is and to live in a way that makes us less than eager to leave this world and go home. It cautions us about getting caught up in what the world views as success, so that we actually rejoice over Esther’s rise to power and prominence and prosperity no matter how she got there. Third, it teaches us that even when we are unfaithful, God remains faithful to His Word and to His covenant promises.

Additional notes and commentary

God is the master craftsman, weaving a masterpiece through lives with what seem to be insignificant threads.

“One gains the impression that Esther’s Jewishness was more a fact of birth than of religious conviction.”

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The Book of Esther is about the sinfulness of those Jews who did not return to the promised land and about God's providential care of His people, not because of the sins of His people, but in spite of them. Sadly, God is not mentioned in Esther, because God is not thought of in Esther. These "people of God" lived their lives as though there was no God. They were practical atheists, seeking to get ahead or to survive by their own wits and cunning, rather than living by God's Word and trusting Him to deliver them by His power. The book does not flatter the Persian Jews, nor should it. But it does too often describe us and the condition of our cold hearts. Heeding the lessons learned from the Book of Esther should help us forsake the cares of this world and cling to Him who has prepared the way to the next.

Esther is not listed in Hebrews 11 with the heroes of the faith. We will certainly not be singing "Dare to be an Esther!" Esther and Mordecai apparently had chosen to adopt the dress, customs, and practices of their Gentile neighbors. Had they followed the Jewish dietary requirements and marriage laws their nationality would be immediately obvious to all. Esther's progress in one world required the denial of her identity in another world. Such a pressure to assimilate and conform we can all identify with as too often we succumb to the same pressure. Many believers try to be secret disciples.

There are many disturbing things about God's people in exile as represented in the Book of Esther. However, God was working silently His perfect plan through the sins and failures of the characters. As the story develops, God overlooks the unfaithfulness of Esther and Mordecai and uses them for His ultimate purposes.

Esther cannot be held up as an example of those Jews who chose to obey God rather than men. Nowhere in this story do we find any references to Esther's character. The description about her life is told in a detached, dispassionate way. Esther is not presented to us as the kind of Jew who was faithful to God in spite of circumstances, as were, for examples, Joseph and Daniel. They were men who pleased God even though they found themselves in compromising situations. They were willing to endure punishment and even face death in order to maintain their testimony as a follower of God. There is nothing in this story to suggest that Esther was anything other than a willing participant in the competition to become queen.