

The Curtain Rises

The Shadow Sovereign- Part Two
Esther 1:3-22

For many centuries the Book of Esther caused a great deal of heartburn in the church.

And that's because God is never mentioned once throughout the entire drama of Esther.

Martin Luther, the Reformer didn't like the Book of Esther because it included what he called, "too many heathen unnaturalities." John Calvin, the Reformer, never preached one sermon from the Book of Esther nor did he include it among his commentaries. In fact, for the first 700 years of church history, not one commentary was produced on the Book of Esther.

Karen H. Jobes *The NIV Application Bible: Esther* (Zondervan, 1999), p. 21

The Jewish people, on the other hand, throughout history, revered this Book. Moses Maimonides, a famous 12th century Jewish doctor and teacher considered it equal with the Books of Moses – Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

In spite of the fact that neither Esther nor Mordecai mention the law of God, or even the name of God . . .

Jewish scholars tried to remedy the situation by adding several sections in the Septuagint – the Greek translation of Esther – centuries ago. They composed 107 verses in all that included prayers by Mordecai and prayers by Esther.

Bibliotheca Sacra, *The Archaeological Background of Esther*, April-June 1980

They tried to make it a little more acceptable . . . to clean it up.

Those 107 verses were obviously late additions to scripture and although the Catholic Church endorsed them in the 16th century, Protestant scholars chose to accept the Book as it was first penned – most believe – by Ezra and his associates.

The rough edges were left intact . . . the heathen unnaturalities only added to the crisis . . . the missing prayers only added to what God obviously wanted us to understand – that He is faithful even when His people are unfaithful.

Although this Book is never quoted in the New Testament, Ezra and Nehemiah aren't either. Some scholars see Hebrews 11:34 as a reference to Esther – where the people of God we're told escape the edge of the sword.

For centuries now we've understood that the absence of God's name in the Book of Esther is one of the major points of the Book – that point is this – even when God is invisible, He is involved.

Even in the shadows, you discover He is the shadow Sovereign.

Esther has become one of the greatest revelations of the providence of God in scripture.

J. Vernon McGee used to say, "Providence is the hand of God in the glove of history."

J. Vernon McGee, *Esther: The Romance of Providence* (Thomas Nelson, 1982), p. 7

Now I want you to think of Esther as the retelling of God's providence in the form of a dramatic play – in fact, think of attending a major musical production.

Maybe you've been to a play or musical.

My wife and I enjoy plays . . . one of the last ones we've seen was our daughter's senior high play at Wake Christian Academy – last year. Charity landed a role in the production, Little Orphan Annie. And of all characters, of all the characters she could have played, my daughter played the unsanctified, sassy, brazen young woman, who along with her boyfriend, try to claim the reward, posing as the long lost parents of Annie.

The curtain rises and my daughter comes out on stage in fishnet stockings and high heels, smacking her chewing gum and talking in this saucy New York accent. I couldn't believe it. I had people come up to me afterward and say, "I have never seen Charity like that before." I said, "Me neither." I had one guy say, "What an acting job." I said, "I don't know about that – when she gets home she's on restriction."

Well, maybe you've attended a play recently. And the usher gave you a play bill and as the orchestra was warming up:

- You read over the introduction;
- You read the bio of the actors and who they're playing;
- You read over the summary of each scene to get a feel for where things are going to take place.

And then . . . the house lights go down and curtain rises and you're immediately struck with the stage and the setting and the costumes.

When the curtain rises in *Esther chapter 1*, the opening scene reveals an incredibly lavish reception.

1. Scene Number One: A Lavish Reception

Notice *verse 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. And he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days.***

And was he ever rich.

In fact, when Alexander the Great eventually arrived victorious at Susa 200 years later, he was mesmerized by the palace at Susa where he finds more than a thousand tons of gold bullion and 270 tons of gold coins.

Ibid, p.61

Ahasuerus – better known as Xerxes – had money to burn. He was going to feed his guests from all around the kingdom for 180 days – that is, for 6 months.

And paying for this reception wasn't nearly as difficult as you paying for your daughter's wedding reception . . . which was bad enough.

But I'm with you dads . . . only the best for our daughters, right? Right?

And I happen to think that Smithfield's Barbecue is the best, amen?

Well that isn't exactly the menu here . . . and you need to know that this is not some extravagant banquet just to eat food.

The third year of the reign of Ahasuerus corresponds with the great war council of 483 B.C. at the Palace of Susa. It was at this council where this King met with the leaders of his nation to convince them that they could successfully invade and defeat the Grecian empire.

Greece and Persia were the two superpowers of the world, at this time.

So this banquet is designed to prove to his subjects that he was everything he had boasted he was, that he was indeed, "The king of all the earth."

After the 180 days were over, Xerxes threw open the doors to include everyone else in the Palace at Susa – notice *verse 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 coout of the garden of the king's palace.***

Now all the administrative staff – his chief of staff – family – and friends are invited.

Notice some of the details we're given in *verse 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 of pavement.***

By the way, the Persian word for garden is *paridaida*. The Greeks later took that word for themselves and in the Greek language it was pronounced, *paradeisos*.

Anthony Tomasino, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Esther (Zondervan, 2009), p. 475

We've taken that word from the Greeks and we pronounce it – paradise.

The audience hall of the palace where all the guests ate looked out over paradise – a magnificent garden where acres of ground featured stone channels for running water; where flowers and trees were planted in beautiful and creative patterns; where reflecting ponds added all the more to the beauty to the gardens that framed the King's palace.

This was paradise – and if you had any doubts, the King of paradise was Ahasuerus.

So, this was the banquet of the century – and anybody who was anybody got an invitation.

Ahasuerus had gathered all the dignitaries – the leaders – the generals and the admirals and all the

powerfully connected movers and shakers in his kingdom which stretched from Africa to India.

If you were an outsider looking on, Ahasuerus seemed every bit the undefeatable, powerful, commanding sovereign that could and would defeat the other kingdoms of the world.

Certainly, this king can command the greatest army of the world.

And then with subtle irony and humor, you discover that this great King, in reality, cannot command his wife.

And so we leave the lavish reception of scene 1 as scene 2 opens with a:

2. A Lascivious Request

First, would you notice the comment in *verse 9 that Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus.*

The reception of Xerxes has been men only. The women were being treated by the queen to their own banquet which was more than likely held during this seven day period.

Historians believe she was giving this banquet included the King's concubines – he had 360 of them.

Gary V. Smith, *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Esther* (Tyndale House Publishers, 2010), p. 232

The word Vashti means desirable – it may very well have been an honorary title for one of his favored wives.

Ibid, p. 231

Jewish tradition holds that she was the great-granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar, the King of the former kingdom of Babylon.

Colin D. Jones, *Exploring Esther: Serving the Unseen God* (Day One Publications, 1978), p. 12

Now watch what happens on the last day of all this feasting – *verse 10 informs us, when the heart of the king was merry with wine* he commands his seven eunuchs who served him to – *verse 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.*

In other words, King Ahasuerus has shown off his splendor and his wealth and his power for 6 months. He now decides to end the lavish reception with a lascivious request – he wants to show off another of his prized possessions.

We know from history that Persian women did not cover their faces with veils. As the queen of the kingdom, she has already appeared in public – more

than likely during this 6 months reception as well as other state functions.

Everybody already knew and recognized the beautiful face of his favored wife.

The Jewish Midrash – a commentary that goes all the way back to the second century explained that the queen was being commanded to actually arrive unclothed – decorated only by her crown jewels.

A. Boyd Luter & Barry C. Davis, *God Behind the Seen: Expositions of the Books of Ruth & Esther* (Baker, 1995), p. 125

I'm embarrassed to have to tell you what was actually going on here – but there just isn't any way to sanitize it.

That's why *verse 10* gives us the added insight – the King requested this *when his heart was merry with wine.*

That's a long way of saying, "When the king was drunk." And you can be fairly confident that most if not all of his guests were drunk along with him.

This had been primarily a men's only banquet – Vashti and the women had been having their own banquet.

And then the request came – the king wanted to end his banquet, not with fireworks, but with lust and envy – he wanted his guests to envy him and regard him in only one more way as the man who had the world on a string.

Herodotus, the Greek historian who lived just after the Persian kingdom ended wrote that the Persian culture was so promiscuous that it was common for powerful and influential men to parade their wives and concubines unclothed in order to show them off to one another [to compete in this manner].

Cyril J. Barber, *Ezra and Esther* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), p. 111

You say, how wicked is that – ladies and gentlemen, we're not that far away.

This is Daytona Beach during spring break; this is the Mardi Gras festival; this is tied to the promise that what you see and do in Las Vegas stays there; this is the local gentlemen's club where anyone but a gentleman actually goes; this is the billion dollar pornography enterprise; and this is the bachelor party you should have walked away from.

This is the all-too-common story where women are paraded about – and then tossed aside – instead of being respected and loved by respectable, loving men.

The spirit of Ahasuerus is alive and well.

And frankly, you might expect Ahasuerus to demand what Ahasuerus just demanded. He was the

King. He had 360 concubines and several wives . . . you would expect that from this kind of man. He wants his guests to envy and admire everything about his life.

What you do not expect is *verse 12. But Queen Vashti refused to come at the King's command delivered by the eunuchs.*

The main attraction refuses to step out on stage.

And so, all of a sudden, you have a supreme commander, showing off for 6 months that he can command the empires of the world – and yet at this moment he cannot command his wife.

Verse 12 continues – then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him.

You're in the audience. There's a commotion backstage . . . some loud whispering . . . the audience can hear it . . . there's something obviously wrong.

And then the messenger who went to get the Queen comes back onstage without her. No one breathes – forks and knives stop in midair.

Can you imagine that poor messenger coming over to the king and leaning down and whispering in his ear . . . “Um, she said she's not coming!”

His face turned red and then purple . . . he has been denied.

Hey, wait a second, “I am the king of all the earth!”

I love this scene . . .

The Queen in the other room just said, “Uh uh . . . it ain't happening” however that goes in Persian. “Ahasuerus, don't make me come out there.”

No, no, no . . . you don't say anything to this king other than, “Yes, your majesty!”

But she said no.

Alexander Whyte, the nineteenth-century Scottish pastor who wrote wonderful character studies of both Old and New Testament characters, says this of Queen Vashti:

The sacred writer makes us respect the queen amid all her disgusting surroundings . . . the brave queen refused to obey [the royal order]. Her beauty was her own and her husband's; it was not for open show among hundreds of half drunk men.

Charles R. Swindoll, quoting Alexander Whyte in, *Esther: A Woman of Strength & Dignity* (Word Publishing, 1997), p. 26

Well said.

Listen, I can't help but admire Vashti here. At this moment she displays unusual character. She

stands up to a man who was known in history for being a brutal man.

But beyond that, she risking everything here. She's willing to sacrifice all the pomp and glamour and wealth – she's willing to walk away from paradise rather than become a sexual pawn – to be shown off like a piece of property – to be leered at by a banquet hall of intoxicated men.

As the curtain rises and eventually introduces us to a queen we all remember – Queen Esther – let's have a minute of silent respect for a queen most of us have never heard of – a queen who was willing to sacrifice her crown, for the sake of her character.

Early on in this drama you're faced with the question – what are you worth? How far are you willing to go in order to win praise or get attention? What will you sacrifice in order to get along with the crowd?

Have you ever lost something because you did something right?

- A relationship?
 - A sales contract?
 - A passing grade?
 - A job?

Take heart from this dramatic presentation played out on the stage of history – it will cost Vashti everything.

It will cost her everything.

But now the King has a big problem on his hands.

He is supposedly able to command the greatest empire on the planet – he is supposedly able to command the greatest army on the face of the earth – but he's just been slam dunked by his own wife, and in front of all the dignitaries, no less, and all the leaders in his kingdom he's been trying for 6 months to convince to follow him into battle.

What he should have done is drink a big pot of coffee and then go and apologize – but he will instead ask advice from men who are paid to agree with him.

So scene two ends and scene number 3 opens:

3. You could call it, A Ludicrous Reaction

Seven men now come onstage – *verse 13* tells us that these are wise men who know the law and understand the times.

We're told *at the end of verse 14* that these are the seven princes of the kingdom – *they had access to the king's presence and sat in the first place in the kingdom.*

In other words, this is his cabinet . . . these are his closest confidants.

He's been royally embarrassed, literally – so he tries to save face and act like this is a matter of the law – so he dismisses himself from the banquet and retreats with his seven counselors to figure out their damage control.

And I've gotta tell you ahead of time, what they come up with is absolutely foolish and almost funny all at the same time.

The first thing they do is butter up the king's wounded ego – *verse 16, In the presence of the king and the other 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 – man, this is worldwide here – now notice, For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, "Well, King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come – never mind what he asked her to do – so, verse 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.*

In other words, we're all in trouble with our wives. Our wives hear about this and they're gonna go on strike throughout the land! Skilletts are gonna be flying through the air – laundry is gonna pile up – meals are gonna disappear – it's gonna be total anarchy.

We don't even wanna go home now!

Oh my goodness, we've gotta stop this national disaster before it happens.

Here's their brilliant advice – verse 19. So let a royal edict be issued and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti may no longer come into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she. 20. When the king's edict which he will make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small.

How many of you guys are thinking, "That's a great idea – I like this book."

The king even further clarifies the edict – notice the middle part of *verse 22 – that every man should be the master of his own house.*

Can I get a copy of that edict?

Can you just see some guy getting this in the mail – "Oh, man, this is what I've been needing."

Can you see him taping that edict up on the window next to the kitchen sink – and then another one in the living room – and then one that hangs over the edge of the television and then another one on the dash of the minivan - the moment the little wife starts to talk back, or disagree . . . all he has to do is point to the edict.

How many of you guys are still thinking, "Let's give it a shot."

If you've been married longer than a few weeks, you've already learned that you can't legislate things like honor and respect – you earn those.

Respect is a gift you're given by your mate whom you respect.

You aren't treated with honor by your wife because you've got stuff taped up around the house. You can't force respect out of your wife or your husband, for that matter.

Those are sown and watered and fertilized before they bear fruit.

The king wants respect from a woman he hasn't respected. He wants honor from a wife he dishonors.

"So I think I'll skip all that and make it into a law of the Medes and Persians. Never mind sowing and watering and fertilizing – I want it now."

The edict of the king and his wise men will only backfire, by the way.

The irony is amazing.

First of all, they want to contain this embarrassing situation, but by sending out the edict via royal mail, the king does nothing more than publicize it throughout the kingdom.

Secondly, they're all afraid that all the women of the kingdom are gonna stop obeying their husbands as soon as they hear about Vashti's disobedience; yet by sending out this royal edict they actually ensure that every woman does hear about it!

Who came up with this?

No wonder the Jews throughout the ages have howled with laughter at the foolishness of the king

and these wise men who must *still be* under the influence of the king's *wine*.

No, the truth is, they've sobered up by now. But they *are* – get this – they *are* under the influence of the King of King's *will*.

No matter how untimely or difficult the events of life become which are played out on the stage of your own life, don't miss this truth parading across a Persian stage, God is backstage directing it all.

His hand is in the glove of your history – not just the history of the world – but your history, too.

No matter how helpless you might feel as your own drama unfolds, God is managing every scene to fulfill His purposes in your life.

He might be hidden in the shadows backstage; He might not have published a play bill that explains every scene in your life, but He's running the show.

One author writes, “don't fall into the trap of thinking that God is asleep when it comes to nations, or that He is out of touch when it comes to carnal banquets, or that He sits in heaven wringing His hands when it comes to godless ruler who make unfair, rash, or even foolish decisions. This is the wonder of God's [providence] – working behind the scenes, bringing out of even the most carnal and secular of settings a decision that will set His perfect plan in place.

Swindoll, p. 30

Esther chapter one simply shows us how God arranged for a position to be opened up in the greatest kingdom on earth – a position that will be filled in just 16 verses by an orphan girl named Esther.

-A girl who becomes a queen who will influence the King in order to rescue the chosen people of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 09/18/2011 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2011 Stephen Davey
All rights reserved.