

Holy Cross Lutheran Church
Livestream Adult Bible Class
May 2, 2021
Esther 1-2

In the space of 22 verses in the opening chapter of Esther, the man who is the most powerful person in the world is reduced to an insecure, indecisive wreck. At the beginning of the chapter, Xerxes is ruler of 127 provinces of a vast empire. By the end, he has lost control of his own household and is forced to pass a harsh edict to reassert his authority. The author of Esther chronicles the downfall but does so to show there is really another Unnamed King at work, using the actions of very imperfect people to achieve his will.

From Party to Proclamation -- Esther 1:1-22

- **Two Banquets (v. 1-9)** -- The book opens with the story of banquets hosted by the king and the queen in 483 BC. The king's "banquet" is a frat-boy party lasting no less than 180 days. It is followed by a second banquet of 7 days. It may have during these parties that the disastrous idea to invade Greece was hatched and planned. There are no details of Vashti's banquet except that it happened.
- **On the seventh day ... (v 10-12)** Having shown off his wealth, the king decides to show off his wife. She is to be dressed up and paraded before the men at the king's party. She however has the sense not to allow herself to be turned into a piece of "eye-candy" for the drunken crowd.
- **"What must be done to Queen Vashti?" (v. 13-22)** What will happen to order in the kingdom if women don't obey their husbands? What is at first a disagreement between husband and wife suddenly takes on the aura of a national crisis. Advisors advise, an edit is drafted; women will respect their husbands from the least to the greatest. Vashti is banished from the king's court.

There appears to be a high level of irony in the events of chapter 1. King Xerxes fancied himself as the one with all the power, but he is a buffoon. He will come to be known as Xerxes the Great, but it will not be for the actions and events of the early years of his reign. The lavish description of the King's garden as a place of debauchery is a contrast to the perfection of the Garden of Eden. The palace of parties is likely a contrast to the holiness of the temple of God. His proclamation is a confession of his own weakness.

The result of it all is a decree that is ultimately very different from God's design for the relationship between husband and wife. The king's decree makes every man in his kingdom the "king of the castle." His wife and children are to obey his every whim. This is not God's design! Instead God establishes marriage to be a relationship of mutual submission, based on the model of Christ being the servant of his people (Eph 5:21). The wife submits to the husband in everything (Eph 5:24) because the husband will give himself up completely for his wife (Eph 5:24).

The Seedy Cinderella Story - Esther 2:1-18

After the party is over and the hangover subsides Xerxes realizes what he has done and he "remembered Vashti." His recollection is filled with regret. He acted foolishly and now his wife is gone

and he will not shame himself by admitting his error. However, he also seems at a loss to figure out what to do about this predicament. His personal attendants suggest a solution:

“Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. 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. And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” This pleased the king, and he did so.”

Now it just so happened that in the city of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai. Mordecai has a cousin named Hadassah/Esther who is an orphan and is “lovely in form and features.”

Mordecai is a name derived from the Babylonian city of Marduk and there is a clay tablet that mentions “Mardukaya” an accountant or officer in the court at Susa during the early years of the reign of Xerxes.

Esther is then brought to the palace and but under the care of Hegai. She wins his favour and gets a degree of special treatment. She is given servants and for 12 months she receives various beauty treatments in preparation for a possible call from the king.

It is also important to remember that Mordecai is of the same tribe as King Saul. Saul had fought several battles with the Amalekites which sets the stage for the hostility between himself and Haman which begin in chapter 3.

What is not explicitly stated is how Esther feels about this whole situation. Was she a willing participant, or was this thrust upon her? What is clearer is that she is in a sense living in two worlds. On one hand she is a candidate to be Queen, a ticket out of a hard life. At the same time, she is a Jew. On Mordecai’s advice, she conceals her identity. While it is tempting to argue this sort of compromise is contrary to God’s will, it is not without parallels:

- Jacob disguised himself as his brother Esau to win Isaac’s blessing.
- Early Christians used the sign of the fish as a secret symbol of their faith and worshiped in the catacombs to avoid persecution.

What is clear is that Esther isn’t just a pretty face. She is a shrewd woman who first wins the favour of the master of the harem and then knows how to guard her speech and take heed to the advice given her (Proverbs 13:1,3).

More problematic, perhaps, is what happens when Esther’s turn comes to spend a night with the king. Over the centuries various attempts have been made to try to clean up the story to alleviate discomfort over the fact that Esther’s night with the king was in effect a glorified one-night stand. Unlike Daniel and others who, in the earlier years of the time of exile, had been utterly faithful in their observance of the Torah, Esther is seen to compromise the Law to possibly become queen.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament includes a prayer supposedly prayed by Esther while in the king’s court:

“...help me that am desolate, and which have no other help but thee. Thou knowest all things, O Lord; thou knowest that I hate the glory of the unrighteous, and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised, and of

all the heathen. Thou knowest my necessity: for I abhor the sign of my high estate, which is upon mine head in the days wherein I shew myself, ... and that thine handmaid hath not greatly esteemed the king's feast, nor drunk the wine of the drink offerings. Neither had thine handmaid any joy since the day that I was brought hither to this present, but in thee, O Lord God of Abraham. O thou mighty God above all, hear the voice of the forlorn and deliver us out of the hands of the mischievous, and deliver me out of my fear." (*Brenton's Septuagint Esther 14:14-19*)

In various other versions of the story, Esther is forcibly taken to the king after trying to hide herself for 4 years, or perhaps it was her spirit (avatar) that was taken to the king, so that she was never really in his presence.

All of these explanations, likely reveal only our squeamishness. One commentator puts it this way:

"Perhaps, however, the trouble is not so much with the Bible as with our expectations of it. Scripture is not a chronicle of great moral examples, ethical heroes, or spiritual giants. Instead, it is the unfolding story of humanity's brokenness, one sinner at a time, and God's redemptive grace in the midst of it. Abraham lied and doubted, but God worked his providential grace through him. Moses became impatient, but God still worked through him. David committed adultery and murder, but God still worked through him. Throughout Scripture, God's people morally compromise, ethically fail, and persistently sin; yet, amazingly, God providentially and graciously continues to use them for his redemptive purposes. And the same thing is true for Esther. She is culpable for her failures. Her compromises cannot be excused, downplayed, or explained away. Yet, in the larger context of the book, this young girl's moral compromises are used by God to deliver his people from potential extermination." (*Bryan Gregory, Inconspicuous Providence: The Gospel According to Esther (Gospel According to the Old Testament)* . P&R Publishing. Kindle Edition.)

The hard reality of all our lives is that we have all made compromises! God does not so much call the gifted and perfected, but perfects and gifts those he calls. His grace is greater than our sin and in that grace even what begins in a less than God-pleasing way, can be used by God to achieve his will.

In the case of Esther, she was several generations removed from the time when the people of Judah were taken into exile. The whole reason for the exile was the failure of God's people to heed his will and it is likely that in many places Jewish children were not taught the faith anywhere near as fully as had been the case centuries before. Thus, she did not obey the dietary laws, nor some aspects of the moral law, but God works through her, nonetheless.

This is great comfort for us today! Whatever compromises you have made, whatever failures you have had, the truth of the matter is that God is subtly at work even in the midst of them. His providence is stronger than your compromises; his grace is greater than your failures. God can take the blemishes and blotches of our lives and use them, redeem them, and transform them, by his grace, into something far greater than we could ever imagine.