

ESTHER STUDY 1

A Royal Disaster

As college students, we can appreciate a good party. When times look bleak, days are long, and our brains are fried, attending a well thought out fiesta is so refreshing. The desire to take a period of time and set it aside to relax, regroup, or just celebrate is not a 21st century phenomenon; throughout history, and especially in the Bible, we see people from all times and places enjoying similar “social gatherings.” In fact, our Biblical text today opens up with what may be one of the longest, most expensive, lavish, and influential banquets of all times.

King Xerxes, also called Ahasuerus, (a title meaning “high father or “venerable king” ¹), was hungry for more power. Although he had brought the Medo-Persian Empire to its zenith, reigning over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, and was one of the wealthiest men in the world, he was discontent. According to Herodotus’ Histories, he was hot-tempered and foolish; desiring to surpass the greatness of all the rulers before him. To this end, he was determined to conquer Greece, a quest that would ultimately lead to his demise and the downfall of the Empire.

The Medo-Persians were not unfamiliar with God or His people, the Jews. In fact, many of Xerxes’ predecessors had encountered God in and through the life of Daniel the Prophet. These men were not perfect, but their respect for the God of the Jews was demonstrated in their laws and decrees that helped His chosen people return to the Promise Land. Xerxes, however, did not follow in the footsteps of his fathers. As G. Ricciotti says, he inherited none of his predecessor’s good qualities, “but only a love of opulent display which progressively sapped his moral fiber.” ² Xerxes was not interested in winning God’s favor; he wanted to win a war and he had a clever plan to gain his nobles’ support.

He decided to hold a banquet that lasted 180 days to display his power and resources, producing confidence in all the royal officials and military leaders from each province that Xerxes was the ruler to bring Persia to world dominance. At the end of the festivities, he held one last banquet in his astonishing garden as a “grand finale” that lasted seven days. In one last strategic move, the king saved the best show of all for last: Vashti.

In the midst of this drunken revelry, we meet Xerxes’ first queen. Biblical scholar and teacher Beth Moore writes: Enter Vashti, the crowned Queen of Persia. Think of the most beautiful woman you’ve ever seen... Some scholars suggest her beauty even surpassed our yet-to-be introduced protagonist, Esther...One reason some scholars surmise that Vashti’s beauty may have even exceeded Esther’s is that, in a genre where words mean the world, Vashti was twice attributed with beauty and Esther, once.” ³

As you may know, beauty is not always a blessing. In Vashti’s case, her beauty drew undesired attention. Her extremely, intoxicated husband interrupted the banquet she was hosting for the royal women and summoned

Pre-Article Questions:

1. In your opinion, what makes a story great?
2. What would be some of the pressures and stresses of inheriting an empire in Ancient Persia?
3. How does having a culturally beautiful appearance often work against woman of the 21st century?

1. McGee, Vernon. History of Israel: Ezra Nehemiah Esther. Thomas Nelson Inc: Nashville, 1991. 175.

2. G. Ricciotti, The History of Israel, vol. 11 (Milwaukee): Bruce, 1955, 16. (The New American Commentary, Breneman)

3. Moore, Beth. Esther: Its’ Tough Being A Woman. LifeWay Press: Nashville, 2008. 19-21

her to come to court wearing her royal diadem. “This would create a dramatic and majestic entrance for her before the men being asked to go to war for the empire. Perhaps the sight of the queen in her royal glory was intended to inspire patriotism and loyalty...”⁴

The request would create a drama indeed, one that Xerxes’ never foresaw, Vashti refused to go. There are many suggestions as to why she refused, but one of the key reasons could have been the insult to her personal dignity and honor. Entering a room filled with drunken men only to be ogled and hooted at, was not on the top of her royal priority list.

As the story continues, the drunk lead the drunk, so to speak. The king’s seven eunuchs and seven advisors conspire and suggest that Xerxes get rid of Vashti and give her position to someone “better than she.” Their reasons are farfetched and seemingly fear-based, but they are unimportant. God is working behind the scenes to place every man and woman exactly where He wants them. The royal disaster will become a fairy tale-come-true under His sovereign hand.

Esther 1, NIV

This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. 2 At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, 3 and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. 4 For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. 5 When these days were over, the king gave a banquet, lasting seven days, in the enclosed garden of the king’s palace, for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa. 6 The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and other costly stones. 7 Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other, and the royal wine was abundant, in keeping with the king’s liberality. 8 By the king’s command each guest was allowed to drink with no restrictions, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.

9 Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. 10 On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him—Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas— 11 to bringbefore him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at. 12 But when the attendants delivered the king’s command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger. 13 Since it was customary for the king to consult experts in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times 14 and were closest to the king—Karshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memukan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.

15 “According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti?” he asked. “She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her.” 16 Then Memukan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, “Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes. 17 For the queen’s conduct will become known to all the women,

4. Moore, Beth. *Esther: Its’ Tough Being A Woman*. LifeWay Press: Nashville, 2008. 21.

and so they will despise their husbands and say, 'King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.' 18 This very day the Persian and Median women of the nobility who have heard about the queen's conduct will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way. There will be no end of disrespect and discord. 19 "Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes. Also let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. 20 Then when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest." 21 The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memukan proposed. 22 He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

Prayer

Dear Father God, it is hard being a woman in a culture so consumed with outer beauty. Please help us to be women who strive for moral character and integrity. Please help us to be women who are courageous and bold, willing to take a stand for what we believe in. Forgive us for our vanity. Forgive us for thinking of ourselves all the time. Forgive us for the time we spend preparing our outer man and the lack of time we give to tending our spirit. Help us to be women who are devoted to the things of Jesus Christ. Help us to be women of purity, noble character, and help us to have a godly fear of You. Have mercy on us, Father. We want to please You above all else. We give You our insecurities, our fears, our hopelessness and we say, "set us free." Take us to where You are and help us to focus our mind on eternal things. Be the treasure of our hearts. We love you; please change us this New Year. Amen.

Scripture Questions:

1. How would you describe the banquet that Xerxes held? What does this lavish affair reveal about his priorities, character, and values?
2. The passage does not give a definite reason as to why Vashti refused to make an appearance. What is your take on her refusal?
3. The King's royal officials and advisors seem very hasty and extreme in their advice. In your opinion, should these men be trusted? Why or why not?
4. On what grounds did the King dismiss Vashti? What does this reveal about his ego, nature, and character?

Application Questions:

1. Read Jeremiah 24:1-7, what does this passage say about God's sovereignty – that is, His control of both personal affairs and international situations? How does this impact you?
 2. Read Psalm 75:6-7, Daniel 2:21, and Proverbs 21:1; what do these verses have in common? How do you see this playing out in Esther, chapter one?
 3. Read Proverbs 31:10, and 30, how do these verses challenge us as women in a culture consumed by physical appearance and less with heart and integrity?
 4. Have you ever struggled with the idea of physical beauty and perfection? What has encouraged you the most in this struggle?
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Prayer Partner Assignment:

This week you will be meeting with a girl from your small group to memorize scripture, re-read the text for this week, and discuss what God is speaking to you through the Chapter. Please use this time to pursue the Lord together and deepen your relationship as sisters.

1. Memory Verse: Proverbs 31:30
2. Please re-read Esther Chapter One