

The Beauty Myth? Esther 1-2

Series: Esther

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Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Esther 1-2

One of the big objections that some people have with the Bible is what it says about women. The Bible, it's argued, comes from a patriarchal society. It views women as inferior to men. It's been used to justify for generations the oppression of women by men. Even depicting God as Father means that God is male, and therefore man is God and women are not. And this sort of attitude has no place in the 21st century. We've grown up and we should leave the Bible where it belongs - in the past.

Well this morning we're beginning a 4 week series on the book of Esther, one of only 2 books in the Bible where a woman is the main character. As we come to the book issues of sexism, patriarchy and the objectification of women loom large. It looks like the book of Esther might confirm all our fears about the Bible's view of women.

But I want to suggest that we shouldn't write Esther off so quickly. Not only is it a terrific story, if we pay attention when we're reading we'll see that it delightfully subverts ancient gender stereotypes. Esther herself provides us a model for faithful discipleship in the messiness of life, regardless of your gender. She's chosen by God to rescue his people, and in doing so she is a type, a picture, a foretaste if you will of Christ himself. By contrast, the story pokes fun at the fragile egos of powerful men. I thought it would be an enjoyable follow on from the Henry Baldwin lecture on masculinity that we just had. Next week we'll look at the unseen hand of God's providence. We'll then look at how Esther tells the story of the gospel. And then finally we'll address the question of violence in the Old Testament that the book raises. I love the book of Esther. The topics it addresses are just as relevant to us as they were when it was written. My hope is that as we look at this little book in God's Word, we'll glean some wisdom to help us navigate life, and we'll find it is life giving for both women and men.

Context

First though, a little context. The book was written by a Jewish author, probably in exile in Persia. Most of the action takes place in and around the imperial palace in Susa, the capital of the ancient Persian empire. The king, Xerxes, is most likely to be the Xerxes who ruled the Persian empire from 486-465BC. Outside the Bible, he is most famous for invading Greece in 480BC, as recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus in his book *The Persian Wars*.

What were the Jews doing in Persia? You may remember back to that great disaster in 586, when Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, destroyed Jerusalem and its temple and exiled the

Jews to Babylon. The Babylonians were conquered by the Persians in 539BC and while they allowed the Jews to return to Israel, many remained scattered across the empire. In any case the Jews remained under Persian rule until the Greeks took over with Alexander the Great.

Until Alexander, the Persian Empire was the largest the world had ever seen. We get a sense of this in the opening lines of the book where the empire is described as stretching from India to Cush, or modern day Sudan. The kings of Persia were called the king of kings and they weren't ones to shy away from displaying their power and wealth if Xerxes' banquet is anything to go by. This book was written to tell the story of the Jewish festival of Purim, which commemorates God's rescue of his people through Esther. We'll hear more about that in coming weeks.

Patriarchy? Subverted

Ok, so what's the view of women depicted in Esther? Well on first sight you'd be forgiven for thinking it's not good. It seems like the women in the story are treated pretty poorly. First we meet queen Vashti when the drunken Xerxes tries to bring her out to show her off to his guests. Then there's Esther who wins the ancient equivalent of a Miss Universe contest. And the final test is being forced to share the king's bed for the night. It looks like the women here are only valued as sexual objects who exist for men's pleasure.

(Sarcasm) Of course we don't have this problem in our day. Our society judges women by the content of their character not their looks, doesn't it? We don't have industries which make their money from objectifying women and parading them for men's pleasure. We would never have a Miss Universe contest run by a man with an inflated ego who ends up becoming the most powerful man in the world. We're much too advanced for that!

This may be the social situation, but let's read a little deeper. Sometimes when we read the stories in the Bible we want them to tell us very clearly - these are the good guys, these are the bad guys, what this person did was wrong, what that person did was right. But Hebrew stories rarely do that. Instead we're invited to assess characters on the basis of their words and actions. They're given enough rope, as it were.

And so, in chapter 1 there's actually a comedy in the palace, and the king himself comes off looking like a fool. Xerxes it seems would fit right into today's world of the "manosphere", where influences like Andrew Tate say that being a man is all about projecting power, wealth and sexual conquest. So the book opens with Xerxes displaying his wealth and glory for 180 days followed by a lavish 7 day feast. On the last day of the feast, the drunken Xerxes sends for his beautiful queen Vashti to show her off to his guests, the ultimate trophy wife. But Vashti refuses to be humiliated. Xerxes cannot stand this slight and is furious. What should he do? He calls in his closest advisors. They suggest he decree that **all** men should control their wives. For all their power, the king and his advisors are terrified of anarchy that would ensue if women showed their husbands up. Xerxes takes their advice, and now not just those at the banquet, but everyone across the 127 provinces of the empire is told how Vashti

disrespected Xerxes and that women should respect their husbands. The decree, evidently made when he was still drunk, only makes him look foolish. Later he appears to regret it on several fronts.

Not only is Xerxes 'bested' by his first queen, the rest of the book shows him being 'bested' by his next queen. Xerxes' big ego can't bear to be slighted or denied. Just as an aside, you remember how Xerxes invaded Greece? To get his army across from Asia to Europe he made a bridge of boats across the Dardanelles. The bridge was destroyed in a storm, and the historian Herodotus records that Xerxes was so furious that he the rocks chained and given 300 lashes as punishment and to show that he was their master.¹ He's the most powerful man in the world, he's meant to be in charge, in control, but throughout the book he never acts of his own accord, he always has to consult others on what to do. He is ruled by drink, his lusts, his wife, his advisors, his emotions, everyone except himself.

Contrast his queen Esther who is seen to be brave, take-charge, focused, wise, and just. Not only Vashti and Esther, but even Zareh, the villain Hamaan's wife, all appear as 'strong **and** shrewd' while all the men (except Mordecai) appear immature, vain and foolish.

It's a reminder for us that spitting the dummy rarely makes us look good. And gents, standing on male pride is likely to make us look the fool, whether that's at work or at home. Humility is a Christian virtue because it was not beneath the true king of kings to step down off his throne and humble himself even to death.

The episode with Vashti reminds me of that incident later in Scripture when this time the drunken Herod brings out his step-daughter Salome to have her dance before his guests at a party. The outcome is much more gruesome. The girl does dance and Herod says he'll give her anything, up to half his kingdom. And so, at her mother Herodias' prompting she asks for and is given the head of John the Baptist. It's Herodias' revenge on John. Both Vashti and Esther, and Salome and Herodias find themselves victims of a system of patriarchy and sexual exploitation. Sex may be their one trump card - but I wonder whether the difference between them is the fact that Vashti, and as we'll see Esther as well, don't use this to manipulate and control the men around them for their own ends. They're somehow able to maintain their character and integrity. It's just a thought - I'd love to hear what you think.

The story of Esther, while presenting a patriarchal culture, seems to subvert and critique it at every turn. Even with the beauty pageant, it's clear that what has shone through is Esther's character, not just her looks. 2.15 *Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her*. And as the story unfolds we see that Esther's strength of character is the crucial factor in the survival of the Jewish people. And it's not idealised, it is real character found in the gritty mess of life. Esther is an orphan Jewish girl. She's from a minority people group in a pagan empire. Her marriage to Xerxes technically breaks the law of Moses which said Jews shouldn't marry

¹ *Histories* 7.34-35

pagans. But Esther doesn't have a choice in being brought into the harem of the great king. Nevertheless, within the constraints she finds herself in, Esther is able to act for God and his people. All of us need to hear this, but particularly our young sisters. There are so so many voices telling us everyday that what matters is how you look, how many friends you have, how many likes you get on Instagram. But these are things that you don't have much control over and they're not going to last. Character on the other hand is something that you can work on, and that can grow and that will shine through. It's depth of character that will mean you can make the hard choice, the costly choice, but the right choice, when the pressure is on.

Now, we're not going to cover the rest of the story today, but it really is delightful, so do go home and read it. Chapter 2 ends laying down a key element of the plot of the book. Esther's uncle Mordecai hears about a conspiracy to assassinate the king. Through Esther's position as queen, Mordecai is able to warn the king. It's a crucial moment which we'll hear more about later in the book. It's a little window into Esther's position of incredible privilege and indeed power. We're getting a little ahead of ourselves, as the story unfolds, the very survival of the Jewish people, her people, is threatened and she has to make a choice. Will she risk her life to save them? And the temptation for Esther is that she's in a place of luxury, comfort and privilege and she doesn't want to lose that. But the only way she can save her people is to be prepared to give that up. To give up the palace, and risk losing her life to intercede before the king.

I think in Esther we see a little picture of Christ. But unlike Esther, Jesus did give up his place in the palace. And he didn't risk his life, he gave up his life. He had to die to intercede before the throne of the King of heaven. And this wasn't for his kin, it was for his enemies, to make them his people, his family. And he did all this because of his great love for you and for me. The more we see his love, the more we'll be able to trust him. Only then will we be able to make those hard choices, saying yes to him and his ways, and no to whatever temptations we face, whatever sweet voices whisper to us. It's only as we see his humility, his love for us, that we won't need to stand on our pride. Because you see it's in knowing Christ, in trusting him, in following him that true character is forged.