

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 8/29/99 Bradley S. Brandt

Esther 1 "How God Used a Domestic Squabble"*

Proposition: In Esther 1, we see how God used a domestic squabble to fulfill His plan for His people. Let's consider the story and its significance.

I. Let's consider the story.

A. Scene #1: A king threw a party (1-8).

1. Xerxes was powerful (1-2).
2. His party was impressive (3-8).

B. Scene #2: The king's party went sour (9-12).

1. Xerxes made a foolish decision.
2. Vashti refused to cooperate.

C. Scene #3: The king sought counsel (13-18).

1. Xerxes stated: "I've got a wife problem." (15)
2. Memucan responded: "You've got a kingdom problem!" (16-18)

D. Scene #4: The counselor gave his recommendation (19-20).

1. Banish Vashti.
2. Get another queen.
3. Do it publicly.

E. Scene #5: The king followed the advice (21-22).

II. Let's consider its significance.

A. Though God may be hidden, He's not absent.

1. There's no mention of God in Esther.
2. But ... He's there.

B. Though life may seem out of control, it's not.

1. God is at work.
2. God has a purpose.

C. Regardless of how we feel, we must choose to trust God.

It was a low time in Israel's history. The glory days of Solomon were a distant memory for the chosen people of God. There wasn't much to celebrate if you were a Jew in the fifth century B.C.

True, the Babylonian captivity was over, at least officially. In 538 B.C. a remnant of Jews left Babylon and returned to the Promised Land. The temple rebuilding was finished in 516 B.C. But facts are facts. And the fact of the matter is that though some Jews returned home, the majority did *not*. They'd grown accustomed to their new life away from the temple, and away from the land of God's promise. They simply chose to disobey the commands of prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel who had said, "God wants you to return home," and they stayed put in foreign lands. They figured life wasn't grand, but at least it was more

comfortable than back in the ruins of Israel.

What does God do when His people ignore Him? Is His faithfulness contingent upon ours? When we break our promises, does He break His?

There's an amazing, often neglected book in the Bible that answers these questions for us in living color. It's a storybook. It's the book of *Esther*.

We serve a God who is faithful and trustworthy. But aren't there times when He seems distant, silent, and hidden? How do you explain those times? How do you make sense of them? The book of Esther can help.

Just how involved in our lives is God? This morning you probably drove your car to this building. On your way you passed many cars. Think of this. If just one of them had swerved but a couple of feet to the left, a head-on collision would have occurred and you wouldn't be here. But that didn't happen, and you are here. Did God have anything to do with that?

But suppose your car didn't start this morning. Was that merely a coincidence, or was God involved in that, too? How involved in our lives is God?

I want to affirm a key biblical truth at this point, and then spend the next ten weeks or so showing you the truth in action. Here it is. *There is not one detail in our lives outside of God's intimate control--not one.*

And now, let the story begin...

I. Let's consider the story.

Esther is one of two books in the Bible named for a woman, the other being Ruth. By Jewish readers the book is called "The Megillah" (*the* Scroll) because of its immense popularity. It continues to be a favorite in Jewish communities, and is read in the family every year at Purim. Esther contains the account of the Feast of Purim, and recalls a time when the Jews were able to turn the tables on those who wanted to kill them.

The book itself is anonymous. Augustine suggested that Ezra wrote it, while others have proposed Mordecai did, but the fact is we simply don't know for sure. Let's examine the narrative.

In Esther 1, we see how God used a domestic squabble to fulfill His plan for His people. The flow of the narrative in chapter one involves five scenes.

A. Scene #1: A king threw a party (1-8). "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 in his own way, for the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished."

The story begins with the spotlight shining, not on a Jewish king, but a Gentile ruler who reigns, not in Jerusalem, but in Susa--the winter capital of Persia. The king's name is Xerxes, or in the Hebrew, Ahasuerus. In the first two verses we learn something significant about this king.

1. Xerxes was powerful (1-2). Very powerful. Xerxes reigned from 486-465 B.C. He was a great builder who completed and improved the great palaces which his father, Darius, had begun. He ruled 127 provinces, from India to Cush (northern Sudan).

Xerxes reigned from his throne in the "citadel" of Susa. The term refers to a fortified acropolis, a palace complex within the city. Susa was the winter residence of the Persian kings.

By the way, in the summer Susa was unbearably hot. Strabo, the Greek geographer said Susa was so hot that lizards and snakes burned to death if they crossed the street at noon and that cold water placed in the sun could be used for a bath immediately! (Huey, 798)

In the third year of his reign (verse 3), which would have been 483 B.C., Xerxes decided to throw a party. But this was no ordinary party!

2. His party was impressive (3-8). According to verse 3, he invited all his nobles and officials. Apparently, having finished his building projects in Susa, Xerxes thought it was time to celebrate.

And celebrate they did! Even the military leaders of Persia and Media were included on the guest list. It's quite possible that in addition to celebrating, Xerxes wanted to use this time with his key officials and officers to plan for his upcoming attack on the Greeks (that three year campaign began the following year).

That may help explain the length of the banquet. Verse 4 indicates it lasted for a full 180 days, during which time the king displayed his vast wealth.

Ctesias, who was the court physician to Artaxerxes Mnemon, said that as many as 15,000 guests were entertained at his king's banquet. King Assurnasirpal of Assyria was reported to have entertained 69,574 guests for ten days in one of his banquets.

At the end of the six month blowout, guess what Xerxes did? He threw another party! According to verse 5, this banquet lasted seven days and was given for all the men in the citadel, from the least to the greatest. This banquet was held outside in the king's enclosed garden.

The narrator describes the splendor of the pavilion in verse 6. There were colorful hangings attached to marble pillars, covering elaborate gold and silver couches, lined by beautiful mosaic pavement.

And the wine flowed, served in goblets of gold (7). By the king's command, every guest was allowed to drink whatever he wanted, with personal attendants at their service. According to Herodotus and Xenophon there was a law that whenever the king drank, everyone drank.

A word of explanation is in order at this point. The book of Esther is a narrative, a story. It tells what happened, not necessarily what should have happened. When it mentions an activity, the intent is not to condone nor condemn it. It's just saying, "This is what happened."

One commentator observes, "As compared with modern story-telling this presentation is entirely objective; the author avoids comment, attempts no character study, no psychological interpretation, passes no judgment. The reader is left to make his own deductions, and no doubt the original Jewish members...were quick to do so."

Before us is a pagan king surrounded by pagan administrators living in a pagan society. Xerxes isn't

interested in the Lord one iota, let alone in holiness. Yet, as we'll be seeing, even when paganism is rampant, God is still at work fulfilling His plan.

That's the first scene--A king threw a party.

B. Scene #2: The king's party went sour (9-12). Verse 9 indicates that Xerxes' party wasn't the only one in town: "Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes." Why the segregated parties? It doesn't seem to have been due to Persian culture, for later in the book Esther will give her own party and entertain the king and Haman. Maybe the size of the guest-list made the dual party setup necessary.

We're not told why. But we are told that on day seven the king's party fizzled in a hurry. Here's what happened. First...

1. *Xerxes made a foolish decision.* Verse 10, "On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine [the Hebrew word can mean anything from "cheerful" to "drunk;" As we'll see, the king wasn't thinking too clearly!], he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him -- Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas -- 11 to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown [the Hebrew is "turban"], in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles, for she was lovely to look at."

Sin is boring. By that I mean that it does not satisfy. What may be a thrill the first time you try it demands something bigger the next time. It's a case of, "Can you top this?"

After seven days of drinking and frivolity, Xerxes made a decision I doubt he would have made had he been sober. He commanded his officials to bring his wife to the party so he could show her off to his male audience. It seemed like a good idea to him, a good way to liven up the party.

So the officials went to retrieve the queen. But...

2. *Vashti refused to cooperate.* Verse 12, "But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger."

Why did Vashti refuse? For one thing, she had her own party going. Or perhaps it was for moral reasons. She wasn't an *object*, and she wasn't interested in degrading herself before the king's drunken guests. So she refused to come.

And the king became irate! His wife had punctured his male ego. He'd bragged to his buddies about his wife. He'd given an order for her to come. And she said *no!*

The king had a problem, didn't he? He may have ruled 127 provinces from India to Cush, but right now he had a domestic problem on his hands!

C. Scene #3: The king sought counsel (13-18). Not a bad thing to do when you're in the midst of a marital spat! Just make sure you seek godly counsel--which, of course, Xerxes did not do.

Notice verse 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 -- Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena and Memucan, 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."

I'm intrigued by how Xerxes viewed his predicament. In essence...

1. *Xerxes stated: "I've got a wife problem." (15)* By the way, no marriage is immune from strain. Put two sinners together under the same roof--two people who by nature are self-seeking--and look out!

Xerxes had a marriage problem on his hands. Of course, from his perspective the problem wasn't with *him*, but with *her*. Isn't that the way we usually are? Never mind he'd just asked his wife to degrade herself before a bunch of drunk men. According to him, *Vashti* is the problem.

Then Memucan spoke up as the spokesman counselor. To be blunt, he didn't help much, but here's what Memucan said, "Um, king, excuse me, but it's worse than you think. You don't just have a *wife* problem. You've got..."

2. *Memucan responded: "You've got a kingdom problem!" (16-18)* Listen to verses 16-18, "Then Memucan 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, 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."

J. Vernon McGee says Memucan sounds like a "hen-pecked husband." In his advise to the king, Memucan said that Vashti had done "wrong" (the Hebrew means "to be crooked"), not only to the king but also to all the nobles and all the people in the kingdom. In other words, Memucan was saying (as McGee puts it), "King, something must be done about this, because if not, I dare not go home!"

Perhaps you've heard of the henpecked husband who came to the office one morning and boasted, "Last night my wife was down on her knees before me." One of the fellows, knowing the situation, was a little skeptical. He said, "What were the circumstances, and what exactly did she say to you?" The husband looked a little embarrassed and admitted, "Well, she was down on her knees, looking under the bed, and she said, 'Come out from under there, you coward!'" (McGee, 37)

I get the sense that was Memucan. Maybe his wife was over at the ladies' party. He could just imagine the scene when the rest of the women at Vashti's banquet saw the queen put her foot down in defiance of the king. "King, this is a kingdom problem! It's just a matter of time before *all* the women of the kingdom find out what the first lady did to you (17), and then they'll follow suit (18). And then, "There will be no end of disrespect and discord (18)."

D. Scene #4: The counselor gave his recommendation (19-20). Memucan continues speaking in verse 19-20, "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." Here's Memucan's threefold recommendation.

1. *Banish Vashti.*

2. *Get another queen.* And...

3. *Do it publicly.* Don't take a "hush hush" approach. Take care of this fiasco in a public way. Make sure the king's edict is proclaimed "throughout all his vast realm (20)." Then we'll get some mileage out of this potential disaster. According to Memucan, if you do this king, "All the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest (20)."

E. Scene #5: The king followed the advice (21-22). "The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed. 22 He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, proclaiming in each people's tongue that every man should be ruler over his own household."

One of Satan's effective tactics is to twist truth. He's doing it today when it comes to the subject of roles in marriage. He's convinced some to *deny* role distinctions, and others to *reinterpret* role distinctions. He does the latter here. According to Xerxes' proclamation, every man was to be *ruler* over his own household. But according to God's Word, men are to be *leaders* of their homes, not rulers (1 Peter 3:7; Ephesians 5:25).

Xerxes was quite a character, wasn't he? Rather than dealing with his marital squabble sensibly, he passed a law to banish Vashti. Talk about overreacting! It's like using a canon to eliminate a fly.

I read an insightful account about another event in Xerxes' life. A couple of years later Xerxes took his army, the largest ever marshaled at that time, and went to battle against the Greeks. He made it as far as Thermopylae. He also led a fleet of three hundred ships, which to his surprise were destroyed at Salamis. After that defeat, in a fit of madness Xerxes went down to the sea and beat the waves with a belt for destroying his fleet.

Xerxes had a lot of ability, but he also had a problem with his temper. And in a fit of rage, he passed an edict he would later regret (see 2:1).

Quite a story, huh? But how does it apply to us?

II. Let's consider its significance.

Some would say there is no significance. Throughout history many have struggled with whether the book should even be in the Bible. Not a single Christian commentary was written on Esther during the first seven centuries of the church's existence. And later, neither Luther nor Calvin wrote a commentary on Esther. In fact, Luther said the book had no place in the canon of Scripture. In his *Table Talk* he said this about 2 Maccabees and Esther, "I wish that they did not exist at all; for they Judaize too much and have much heathen perverseness."

But Esther does exist, and Esther *is* in the Bible, not by accident but by God's design. What's more, Esther *is* loaded with significance for us. 2 Timothy 3:16 states that *all* Scripture is profitable. I'm convinced we need the message of Esther.

Today, we as the people of God, like the Jews in the fifth century B.C., are living in a pagan society. Like them, we are a minority. Like them, we've watched scandalous events occur in the highest office in the land. And like them, we feel helpless at times wondering where all this is heading.

I believe Esther can help us. As I ponder the message of Esther 1, I discover three very practical truths.

A. Though God may be hidden, He's not absent. One of the reasons people have questioned the value of Esther is this...

1. *There's no mention of God in Esther.* You will not find the name of God mentioned anywhere in the book. Neither will you find any mention of sacrifice, the Scriptures, or even prayer (the closest thing to a "spiritual" discipline is fasting in 4:16).

As we read Esther 1 there's no mention of God. All we have is a story about a pagan king, his pagan friends, a marital spat, and an edict by a pagan government. Just where is God? He's not mentioned but...

2. *But ... He's there.* Esther shows us that even in a distant, far away country, God's people are still in His hands.

Esther reveals the doctrine of God's *providence*. The God of the Bible is the God who uses the most ordinary circumstances to accomplish His purpose. Though you won't find God's name in Esther, you'll certainly find God. God orchestrates event after event to fulfill His plan. In Esther, God works *behind the scenes*--which, by the way, is the way God *usually* works.

Can God miraculously eliminate an adversity? Can He heal a body that's full of cancer? Can He turn five loaves of bread into a meal for five thousand hungry men? Certainly, God can do that. But that's not His typical pattern. Usually, He works quietly, methodically, purposefully *behind the scenes*--just like He did in Esther.

He can take a marriage squabble and use it to bring honor to Himself and good to His people. You say, "I didn't see that in Esther 1." No, but if you keep reading you *will*. You will discover an amazing truth. Though God may be hidden, He's not absent.

B. Though life may seem out of control, it's not. Quite frankly, Esther 1 doesn't make much sense...*yet*. Right now the events seem bizarre, even out of control. But just wait until we see the Jews rejoicing in chapter 9. In the mean time be assured of two things...

1. *God is at work.* He's not a passive spectator. He's actively involved in the affairs of this world. And not just in a general way, either. He is intimately involved in the details of our lives. He's at work. What's more...

2. *God has a purpose.* It's not just that God is busy doing *something*, but that He's at work fulfilling His good *purpose*. He has a plan. History is *His* story.

We may wonder, "Does God have anything to do with what happens in the secular world where we live?" And the answer from Esther is *yes*--more than our finite minds will ever be able to comprehend. He's not only watching. He's *working*.

There may be times when life seems out of control, but it's not. The Sovereign Lord is at work fulfilling His eternal purpose. In essence, that's the message of Esther.

God used a sensual, pagan king who threw a party to set in motion a plan by which He would rescue His people from a near holocaust. *Wow!*

And that's not all. As we move through the story in future weeks, we're going to see a Jewish orphan girl named Esther just "happen" to win a beauty contest, her prize being the king's hand in marriage. Next, the girl's uncle, Mordecai, just "happens" to uncover an assassination plot against the king. Then the king just "happens" to not be able to sleep one night, and needs help for his insomnia. Instead of calling for soothing music, he just "happens" to call for the reading of some boring board minutes, and in so doing discovers he had failed to reward Mordecai properly.

He "happens" to discover this oversight just hours before Mordecai was to be killed by one of the king's trusted court officials. The man who built the set of gallows to kill Mordecai just "happens" to offend the king on the very day the gallows were built, and his wicked plot backfires. And Mordecai just "happens" to be promoted to the number two man in the nation, and the Jewish people avoid a holocaust.

It all just "happened," right? Just like you just "happened" to be here this morning, listening to God's Word. Just like my father just "happened" to receive a job transfer when I was ten that resulted in our family leaving an apostate church and landing in a Bible-believing church. Things just "happen," right?

No. God is at work fulfilling His purpose. Nothing just "happens."

Dear friend, though life may seem out of control, it's not. No matter how bad it is, God is in control and has a purpose.

Remember the cross. Why would God allow wicked men to abuse and impale His own Son? Why? That's the question Jesus' own followers couldn't answer on that terrible Friday. The cross didn't make sense to them...at the time. It did later.

Three days later God's plan began to make sense when Jesus left the tomb. It made even more sense forty days later when He ascended to His throne in heaven. And it will make perfect sense when He returns in glory for the Bride He redeemed, and every knee bows.

So remember this. When life seems out of control, it's not. And if that's the case, so is truth #3...

C. Regardless of how we feel, we must choose to trust God. The hymnwriter said it well, "Trust in Him, ye saints forever. He is faithful, changing never. Neither force nor guile can sever those He loves from Him."