



Sermon-Based Study Guide
Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church

Esther 2.1-18 | May 29, 2016

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I. Introduction to this Study

This week we continue our new series For Such A Time As This, engaging the Book of Esther. The outset of chapter 2 details how Esther became *Queen* Esther. And like much of the rest of the book, it's a bit scandalous!

II. Connecting With One Another

In one way, the verses before us this week recall that famous fairy tale, Cinderella, in which unjust oppression ultimately leads to triumphant reward. While the most popular version of the story was written by Charles Perrault in 17th century France, the oldest documented version comes from China. Even in our modern culture, television shows like *The Bachelor* play on similar themes.

Bryan Gregory makes the connection to the pages of Esther: "In the fairy tale, the prince is in search of his true love, so he gathers all the eligible bachelorettes in the kingdom to a ball. When Cinderella captures his heart, she goes from rags to riches. Similarly, the Persian king Xerxes is searching for a new queen, and he also gathers all the eligible bachelorettes in the empire to the royal palace. Esther impresses the king more than anyone else, and she too goes from rags to riches. The big difference, however, is that Cinderella captures the royal heart by dancing, whereas Esther has to do more than just dance."

What questions or concerns does this connection bring to mind?

III. Study the Text

- a. Before continuing, pray that God would open your eyes and soften your heart to the message of Esther.
- b. Recall that during the Festival of Purim, Jews read the book of Esther aloud, interacting with it at every twist and turn of the plot. Reread (or, if you're short on time, skim!) Esther 1.1-22, again thinking through its themes of excess.

What comes to mind reading Esther 1 again?

Do you notice anything that you had previously missed?

- c. Read Esther 2.1.

What's the first word or phrase in verse 1? Write it here:

If you're meeting in a group, share this word or phrase with others, including the translation you're using. If you're engaging this study alone, click onto biblegateway.com and look through a few different versions to get a sense of how English translators parse the Hebrew. (Doing so is a great way to get a full sense of the range of meaning present in the Bible's original languages)

This is a sort of "morning after" scene. When have you had a "Later" or "After these things" experience?

Taking just that first word or phrase, what do you think would normally come next in a story like this? (for the purposes of this question, try to forget Esther 1.19, which asserts that the law that banished Vashti "cannot be repealed")

- d. Another important word in verse 1 is "remembered." The Hebrew word, *zä·kar'*, means "much more than simply recalling to mind the pertinent information; it has a more robust sense to it,

having the connotation of recalling something with affection, almost like nostalgia. In other words, Xerxes is not simply reviewing dispassionately the events that have transpired, he remembers Vashti warmly and is stricken with regret over the way he treated her. Perhaps he is sorry that she complicated the matter by not coming when summoned. Perhaps he is sorry that he acted so rashly. Or perhaps he realizes what he has lost, now that she is gone, and he misses her. Whatever the reason for his regret, however, there is nothing he can do about it now."

What do you think of "King Headache" is "remembering"? What is the "reason for his regret"?

- e. Reread Esther 2.1, and then continue through verse 4.

Again, the king is incapable of devising his own plan. And yet, because others' extravagant plans feed into his wanton self-indulgence, they are immediately appealing. Unlike other careful, thoughtful kings, Xerxes shows no concern for his future wife's political or familial significance, nor for her character, intelligence, or inner beauty. "As far as the king is concerned, there are only three criteria that matter: youth, virginity, and physical beauty."

What are we learning about King Xerxes? Have you known leaders like this, who prioritize the wrong things?

Have there been times in your life where you've prioritized the wrong things?

- f. Read Esther 2.5-6.

In these verses we are again reminded of the setting: Susa, one of the four capitals of Persia. For a 5th century Jew this was pagan territory, highlighted by the genealogy in verse 5 (we will return to this information in future weeks). What's more, while verse 6 has been smoothed in our English translations, the literal Hebrew reads,

...who had been *carried away* from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been *carried away* with Jeconiah king of Judah whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had *carried away*.

How is this literal rendering different from your Bible's translation? (note the italics)

- g. It's been written that "The narrator highlights Mordecai's genealogy and specifically notes the role of the exile in their history. In fact, the verb *carried away* (literally, "exiled") is used three times in the same verse... as if to emphasize just how traumatic the ordeal of the exile was. Clearly, Esther is part of a beleaguered people, desperately needing to catch a break." (notice, though, that we aren't immediately introduced to Esther, but instead to her cousin Mordecai)

Without reading ahead (and pretending you don't know the story!), what do you think is going to happen!?

Why do you think we're introduced to Mordecai first?

- h. Read Esther 2.7.

Again, Esther is "part of a beleaguered people, desperately needing to catch a break." And they're about to. According to the text, how are they about to catch a break? (if you need a hint, reread verse 2)

In light of their geographical and political setting, what tensions are being introduced into the story?

How do you think they'll be resolved?

- i. Esther is referred to with a Hebrew name "Hadassah," and "also known by a Persian name, Esther." (In fact, she's the only person with two names throughout the whole book) While her Jewish family and friends would have called her Hadassah, her Persian name - Esther - is very similar to the Hebrew word for hiding. Had a fellow Israelite called her Esther, they would have essentially said "I Am A Hiding Place" or "I Am Hidden." (other places a similar word is used are Genesis 4.14, Job 13.20, Psalm 55.12, Ezekiel 39.23-24)

How do you think this informs the story of God's hiddenness?

j. Read Esther 2.8-14.

Some commentators have pointed out in the Hebrew text that while other girls were "gathered", Esther was "taken." While that may be the case, it is certain that she is caught between two worlds, between being Hadassah and Esther: "Part of her identity is rooted in her Jewish heritage; part of her identity is tied up in her Persian culture. As the events of the book unfold, the tension between her two identities will force her to decide between them on several occasions, the first one being almost immediately after she arrives in the royal palace. On the one hand, being true to her Jewish roots would certainly mean avoiding at all costs becoming a pagan king's concubine. On the other hand, living in the cultural climate of the Persians would mean seeing the luxury of the Persian court as something desirable."

When have you felt trapped between two worlds?

How did you discern where to be faithful? (check out Romans 12.1-2 for our clear call to be "in the world, but not of it")

k. This "year at the spa" includes both oil and cosmetics, suggesting "some sort of fumigation bath treatments that presumably change skin tone and remove spots or blemishes over time."

We know explicitly that Esther is beautiful. What else do we learn about Esther in verse 9?

How do you think that will be important in the story?

l. Read Esther 2.14-18.

The date given in verse 16 reveals that it's now four years since Vashti's removal. If Xerxes didn't tarry too long before starting this competition, it's possible that he may have met over 1,000 girls before Esther. While the previous queen, "who was unwilling to become the king's sexual object, Esther seems only too willing."

While some scholars have sought to minimize her sinful actions, the text gives us no reason to do so. We see no reason to believe she kept the Sabbath, food laws, or intermarriage with non-Jews. Unlike Daniel, who refused the dietary delicacies of the pagan court and refused to stop praying even in the lion's den (see Daniel 1, 6); unlike Joseph, who resisted the sexual advances of someone in power (Genesis 39); until Ezra, who went to great lengths to show people the sin of intermarriage (Ezra 9); Esther found herself in a difficult place and she has compromised.

How does this alter your understanding of this book? What is the lesson it's seeking to teach?

m. It has been written, "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 and a time, and God's redemptive grace in the midst of it. Abraham lied and doubted... Moses became impatient... David committed adultery and murder..." and God worked through all three. And can, as well, through you and me.

Where does this above quote challenge your understanding of the Scriptures?

Do you agree with it? Why or why not?

n. How else does Esther 2.1-18 prompt you to follow Jesus even closer?

IV. Pray

- a. Thank God for the free gift of salvation through Jesus Christ, the One in whom all can go "from rags to riches" and "have our spots and blemishes" removed,
- b. Ask God to give you courage to live faithfully in our culture into which it feels like we've "been carried,"
- c. Confess any sins that Esther 2 prompts in your own life - any things which you "remember",
- d. Pray that God would give you a missional heart to reveal His presence to those who know only His hiddenness.