

Why this? Why now? Why me?

- If you live long enough, you will ask these questions.
- Inevitably, you will be confronted by things in life which will shake your beliefs. Is there really a God? If so, where is he in all this?
- Many are asking this question, especially with the chaos around us.
- Well, if you are new to Esther (or the Bible!) you might be tempted to come to ask such questions when you begin to read this book.
- It is a story in which God is never mentioned, not even once. There are no miracles, and the main characters are a bit flawed.
 - For those of you who were raised Christian and were given a sanitized version of Esther, you might be in for a surprise!
- For some in history, the book of Esther is *too* scandalous (some Jewish communities forbid that it be read before the age of 30!)
- For this reason, many people have struggled with this book!

Martin Luther “I am so great an enemy to Esther, that I wish it had not come to us at all, for it has too many heathen un-naturalities.”

- After all, on the surface, it is a story of sex, money and power.
 - And, perhaps, some suggest, its best not to preach through it (guess what we are going to do!)
 - And yet, it is Scripture. And we believe that all Scripture is profitable
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17** All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching
- In the bigger picture, Esther is a part of the whole Bible’s storyline
 - For it is a story of the remarkable deliverance. This book provides the incredible account of a people who were on the verge of being wiped out altogether, and yet experienced a remarkable reversal of fortunes. And let’s not miss this. In hindsight, it **IS** a miracle!

Walker Percy “Why does no one find it remarkable that in most world cities today there are Jews but not one single Hittite, even though the Hittites had a great flourishing civilization while the Jews nearby were a weak and obscure people? When one meets a Jew in New York or New Orleans or Paris or Melbourne, it is remarkable that no one considers the event remarkable. What are they doing here? But it is even more remarkable to wonder, if there are Jews here, why are there not Hittites here? Show me one Hittite in New York City.”

- This book puts in story-form what the rest of Scripture makes plain: that no matter how dark the day, no matter how broken the world is, God is at work. Though for seasons, it may be hidden to us.
- In fact, this hiddenness is a key to the whole story. The identity of Esther herself is somewhat hidden. The motives the main characters are hidden. God himself, again, is not mentioned.
- But amid the hiddenness, there is hope.
- The Jews, who throughout much of history have survived without a land of their own, lived in hope of the promise that God was at work bringing about deliverance... not just for them... but for the world!
- It all takes place around 486 BC, a time when many of the Jewish people were in exile. 100 years before, they had turned from God and as a result, lost their land and were taken into captivity.
- Here is another important detail. A generation before Esther, Jews were able to return to Jerusalem from captivity, and many did. But others stayed in Persia, for they were prospering and in Persia, which some saw as a compromise. In any case, Esther, this woman who would become queen, is raised by a close family member, an older cousin Mordecai. who become the main characters of the story.
- Yet unlike the famous prophet named Daniel that we read about who had lived in Jerusalem prior to captivity and remembered his heritage, and practiced his faith, Esther was raised in Exile, disconnected from the practices of her people and perhaps even some of the beliefs. Unlike Daniel, the texts indicate that she was more acclimated to a godless world. And if we are honest, we might have more in common with Esther than Daniel. More on that later.
- And yet, through the story, Esther faces the possibility of re-awakened faith and renewed identity.
- And so, Esther becomes a sort of a field guide for how to live in a world that seems disconnected from God. (can you relate?)

- And the broader application goes beyond the immediate Jewish context For Humanity is in exile! Out of the Garden! A world cut off from God. And anyone who comes to God in faith, will feel it daily.

Walter Brueggemann “Exile is the experience of knowing that one is an alien (stranger), and perhaps even in a hostile environment where the dominant values run counter to your own”

- But there is hope and purpose even in exile. Esther reminds us of this. This story is a *link* in a long *chain* connected to the promise of renewal for *all* people through God’s grace.
- It can help us see how we ought to live. And... how *not* to live!
 - Within such pressures, our main characters are not always models of virtue. In the same way that many of us are not living how we ought! In some ways, parts of Esther’s story will serve as a cautionary tale of compromise!
 - And yet at other times, we see glimpse of renewed identity reawakened faith and remarkable courage.
- It is my goal to bring these lessons out over the coming months... in the hope that we might be able to understand, with Esther as our launching point into the rest of Scripture, how to live in exile.
- But before we get to these main characters, we begin with a very, very drunk King. And his story highlights our first lesson. We must:

1. Identify the Idols (v 1-9)

- a. And in the palace of King Xerxes, they are on full display.
- b. Now, you may wonder what on earth we have in common with a Persian ruler from 483 BC. the answer is: more than you think
- c. The costumes may have changed but the story is still the same.
- d. The Kings 180-day party displays what many of us *desire* and *look to* for meaning, purpose, to find salvation.
- e. And that is, by the way, what an Idol is, whatever you look to besides God, to give you what only God can give.
 - i. And when we cling to these things, they lead us away from God and blind us to our need for him

- f. And when we understand it like that, we begin to see the connection between Xerxes empire and our modern world.
- g. He displays what many of us desire. And in this is demonstrates how our hearts work. For, whatever we adore, we advertise, whatever our hearts revere, we reveal in our lives!

h. Is achievement our idol?

V 1-3 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.

- i. Well, he had it all! He reigned, we are told in verse 1, from modern day Pakistan to north Sudan, 127 provinces, unified clearly by his vast military and political system which found its centre in Susa. At the time, it was the greatest empire ever known.
- ii. This idol is both ancient and modern... our culture today tells us very simply that the way to "find ourselves" is through achievement!
 - 1. What have you ***done? Earned? Accomplished?***
- iii. If you find yourself constantly needing to prove yourself... you may be sacrificing to the idol of achievement.
- iv. if you find yourself constantly comparing yourself with others and find yourself struggling when they advance but you don't, then you may be sacrificing to the idol of achievement. (they bought a house, you didn't...)

i. Is appearance our idol?

V 4-5 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

- i. Notice the language, carefully chosen in verse 4, "for 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendour and glory of his majesty"

- ii. Not only the **up / in**, but he also invites the **down / out**.
- iii. Verse 5 tells us he opened the doors to everyone, from the least to the greatest!
- iv. In one sense, this was a political move. With an empire this large it was essential that you had everyone's unified support. But in another sense, it was personal. He wanted to *appear* powerful to *everyone*.
- v. If you find yourself constantly working to gain people's approval, constantly worried about how other people view you, it may be that appearance has taken central place in your heart! You live by the praise of people.

j. Is appetite our idol?

V 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. 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. 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.⁹ Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of Xerxes.

- i. Xerxes palace was so extravagant, it makes Saks Fifth Avenue look like Walmart.
 - 1. The rarest linens, like ridiculously priced designer products, were basically curtains
 - 2. Couches... GOLD. It says ETC.
- ii. Ever seen a wedding with an open bar? Don't do it!
- iii. The only rule, verse 8, was that there was no rule.
- iv. The wisdom of the day is, essentially, do what you want!
- v. WE live in an age in which our appetite is given highest authority. Could be pleasure, money, possessions...
- vi. Pleasure, when disconnected from its purpose, brings pain and dishonors our creator. And that is why it is sin.

- k. And sadly, this so-called rule of “do what you want” extended to people. Which made Persia was a terrible place to be a woman, as we shall see.
- l. This shows how idols work, they make a promise and demand a sacrifice. In this case the dignity is sacrificed for pleasure.
- m. All these areas, when given central place in our lives apart God’s purpose, they make promises and demand sacrifice
- n. Now, it would be easy to condemn his overkill, but in doing so we may condemn ourselves. For many of us have the same *idols*, we just don't have the same *bank account*.
- o. We might not have harams, but what about pornography?
- p. We might not have a palace, but what about greed?
- q. We might not rule an empire, but what about our longing to be approved by others?
- r. And all of this takes place under the slogan “do what you want”
- s. However, the minute you challenge that, you will feel the wrath. And on this particular occasion, someone did.

2. Settle Your Convictions (v 10-15)

- a. This idea of “no limits” seems all fine... until someone says no. And on that day, Vashti the Queen said no.

V 10-12 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 Carcas—¹¹ to bring before 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.

- b. In verse 10, the king was very drunk, and sends not one, not two, but SEVEN servants to fetch his wife (the overkill!)
- c. Now, much has been written about Queen Vashti... some portray her as hero, others as a villain.
- d. Some writers have assumed that the lesson is a cautionary *tale for wives who are “out of order!” For Xerxes and his counsellors, this is an honor issue.*

- e. But others praise her for standing up to an abuse of power
- f. After all, we will see later, Xerxes and his council do not embrace the beautiful description of honor in Eph.5 Far from it.
- g. Though we are not explicitly told, the text hints at the dignity of her refusal. After all, this is ancient Persia, and We are warned to not sanitize this. Many commentators and Rabbis believe that this was exploitive, she was being asked to wear nothing except a crown. So, it would seem for the sake of dignity, she said NO. Honor is not about exploitation. There is a never a time we are asked to do wrong in the name of honor.
- h. Now, like other parts of this book, the author does not reveal motives. Its emphasis is on choices and their consequences. And when the King asked Vashti to be displayed, she defied the one person who seemed to have all the power.
- i. The episode paints a picture of what life was like in a world where such power exists, and where such idols rule.
- j. It also gives the context for the story: Mordecai and Esther will be up against tremendous odds when it comes to their survival. If they are to make their way forward, they must settle *their* convictions and make their choices when the time comes.
- k. It's the same for us. What is true? And what should I do?
- l. **Conviction is essentially when the truth becomes personal.**

2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

- m. Accounts like this invite us to gain a better knowledge of truth, of Scripture, and how we should engage!
 - i. For many of you, Christian faith is something you kind of assume, or inherit from someone else.
 - ii. But you, like the men and women in this historic account, will face turning points, defining moments. In anticipation, you must settle your convictions!
 - iii. The alternative to truth-based conviction is idolatry.

- n. The alternative is seen in Xerxes. In verse 13-15 he asks his counsel regarding what should be done. In fact, it is notable that throughout this whole book, he does nothing without the influence of someone else's opinion! He is not asking what is true! But what serves his position, image... and ego!
- o. But know this! When you challenge such idols with truth-based conviction... you may not be liked. You may even be opposed! When you challenge idols, there will always be consequences. And that is a third lesson When you identify the idols and settle your convictions, you must also:

3. Count the Cost (v 13-22)

- a. The queen's refusal triggers a range of events, all of which shows what can happen when an ego is wounded, and how much a wounded ego can cause great damage. The response is so out of proportion (as is ours!) He calls an entire counsel!

Vs 13-18 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.” ¹⁶ 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.

- b. Sticking to conviction means there may be a cost. It might be subtle: rejected by your friends. Or it might be massive. As we will see, Esther will become Queen in Vashti's place. And she will access what the king has... power, wealth... at least, up until she has a moment of not just political crisis, but personal

and spiritual crises, where she will have to settle her conviction... make her choices and risk the cost necessary for it.

c. In fact, verses 19-22 set the scene for Esther's arrival!

V 19-22 "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 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.

d. And we ask, "What will Esther do once *she* is in this position?"

e. And in her story, we see in many ways ourselves... in the midst of a clash of worldviews, we have to decide... what matters most... and count the cost. This is the lot for all who seek to be faithful in exile. What will *we* do when we feel the pressure?

i. Following the truth will cost. Generosity in a world of greed. Justice in a world of wrongs. Fidelity in a world of promiscuity. Discipline in a world of unhinged appetite.

f. And you may wonder, ok I get it, but is it worth it to count the cost? Why is it so hard? And where is God??

g. Where do you find this conviction to live rightly? Well, we must

4. Trust the Good King

a. In Esther, God is silhouetted. It is his absence that reveals his presence... the one who seems to be in control, Xerxes, is not! This ruler will not have the last word!

b. You see, the story of Esther raises questions to which the gospel is the answer. And in chapter 1, the portrait of a bad king prepares us for the true and good king, Jesus Christ!

c. Many have made the contrast between them, and it's a contrast that builds our faith!

- d. Xerxes thought he was a man become God, but Jesus is God who became a man!
 - e. This bad king used his people to **build** him a throne, Jesus came to save us by **leaving** his throne!
 - f. This bad king gathered his riches **apart** from the poor and needy, but Jesus gave up his riches to **save** the poor and needy!
 - g. This bad king used his power to abuse women and exploit men, Jesus dignified women, Jesus dignified men
 - h. This bad king lived his life being served; Jesus used his whole life serving others.
 - i. This bad king was arrogant, Jesus is humble
 - j. And to free us from the grip of idols, our sin, our shame, our hopelessness our wandering hearts, Jesus did not just *count* the cost, he *paid* the cost! He is the king who lays down his life!
 - k. He died for your sins and is risen in glory and power!
 - l. As we will see through this book, those who appear powerful now, will not have the last word! Jesus has the last word. King Xerxes is dead and forgotten, but King Jesus lives and reigns!
 - m. Idols will let you down, even exploit, and break your hearts! But King Jesus never will! Trust him.
 - n. In receiving Jesus, we receive even greater gifts. Forgiveness, healing, renewal, resurrection. We are citizens of heaven! We can have hope. And he is preparing a banquet for us! And so today we celebrate!
 - o. Worship him And watch your conviction, courage and compassion grow!
- *So, right now is a time of response, repentance and prayer and worship! Where is the Spirit identifying the idols in your heart? Where do you need to settle your convictions and count the cost?*
 - *Above all, where do you need to trust the good king?*