

Panic in the Palace  
Esther 1:13-22  
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Last week we explored the first twelve verses of the book of Esther and were introduced to the Persian King Ahasuerus, the most powerful man on the planet at the time, about 500 years before Christ.

He has gathered political officials from all over the empire in the capital city of Susa, apparently in an effort to raise an army to fight the Greeks.

The long conflict culminates with a seven-day feast and on the last day an intoxicated Ahasuerus orders his queen, Vashti, to come and entertain the men with her beauty. The entertainment was NOT supposed to be “wholesome”.

However, Esther 1:12 Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command...At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

That brings us to our text today: Esther 1:13-22. Now, this is all part of the introduction to the book, explaining how a young Jewish girl ends up as the Persian Queen. Yet, even in this part of the story, I think the Lord is speaking to us.

In recent years, Esther, Chapter 1, has received a great deal of attention from some so-called feminist Biblical scholars. To them, Vashti has become a kind of cult hero or heroine.

They say, “When a man, your husband, acts like a pig and treats you as nothing more than a sexual object, the right thing to do is be like Vashti. Just say no; refuse his demands; stand up for yourself and do what you want to do. God is pleased when you do that.”

In response, more traditional scholars have said something like this, “There is no excuse for the king’s drunken behavior, but that does not justify Vashti’s rebellious behavior. Family and society depend on the God-ordained pattern where the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church.” They say, “Memucan is giving a very practical warning. If women start following Vashti’s model and think there is no

need to submit to their husbands, things are just going to fall apart.”

Well, folks, I don’t think either of those interpretations are what the writer of Esther, or the God who inspired the writer of Esther, had in mind as he wrote this book.

If you want to know my views on that topic, you can read the sermon I preached on Ephesians 5 a few months ago, that can be found either on our church website or YouTube page.

My point is that if we focus on the marital relationship between the King and Queen of Persia, we miss the important truth the Lord has for us in this passage.

So, what is God’s message for us? Well, let’s look at our text. King Ahasuerus is furious at Queen Vashti. He turns to his cabinet of counselors: Esther 1:14 the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king’s face, and sat first in the kingdom.”

Verse 13 notes they are wisemen, which apparently to the Persians meant astrologists. How much “wisdom” they actually possess is, as we will see, questionable. But these are the men the king relies on for advice. He asks them: Esther 1:15 “According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?”

This refers to the seven eunuchs who had been given the assignment to bring the queen to the king. The response to the King’s Queen comes from the advisor Memucan. We do not know if he is the leader of the cabinet or just the most outspoken, but this is what he says, Esther 1:16b-20 “Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. 17 For the queen’s behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, ‘King Ahasuerus commanded Queen

Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' 18 This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. 19 If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. 20 So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike."

As I look at this particular passage, I am struck not so much by the actions of King Ahasuerus or Queen Vashti, but by the total overreaction by Memucan to what has occurred. I think the Queen's refusal to answer her drunken husband's summons could have been kept as a private palace affair. When he sobered up, the King could have apologized to the Queen, who would then likely respond with her own apology, and they would have been back to one big happy royal couple.

Yet, listen again to the counsel of Memucan, the "wiseman" advisor. I'm going to read this from the New Living Testament: Esther 1:16-18 "Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but also every noble and citizen throughout your empire. 17 Women everywhere will begin to despise their husbands when they learn that Queen Vashti has refused to appear before the king. 18 Before this day is out, the wives of all the king's nobles throughout Persia and Media will hear what the queen did and will start treating their husbands the same way. There will be no end to their contempt and anger.

He then adds: if the King will remove Vashti as Queen and let everyone know what has happened, then Esther 1:20b Husbands everywhere, whatever their rank, will receive proper respect from their wives!"

Wow! Remember, there is no reason to believe anyone, other than the seven eunuchs assigned to the task of bringing Vashti to the King, knew of her refusal to comply. At this point, no women, except maybe a handful of servants, knows

anything about this! There is no women's liberation movement going on in ancient Persia. I believe what Memucan says is a huge over reaction to the event that occurred.

Now, frankly, I don't know if this man is actually panicked because he is that paranoid, or if he is trying to engage in some political manipulation by getting others to panic. The fact is that his fears and the scenarios he imagines are ridiculous. It is not likely the entire social fabric of the Persian Empire will be ripped apart because of the refusal of one woman to not heed the King's summons. That is an incredibly naïve view of reality.

King Ahasuerus, although a very powerful man is not, we would say, "the sharpest pencil in the box." Even though he is apparently now sober, Esther 1:21,22 This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. 22 He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

Okay, that is our text. I think there are two main points that the writer of Esther and God, who inspired that writer, are making in this passage.

#1: Powerful people, though maybe impressive in some ways, can be very foolish. One of the key themes of the Old Testament is Proverbs 9:10 The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding."

The court of the pagan Persian ruler, King Ahasuerus, though possessing immense political power, is really made up of foolish men who do not fear and trust the Lord. Their ridiculous panic over Queen Vashti's refusal to heed a drunken king's summons illustrates this.

In 1 Kings 18, Elijah mocks the prophets of Baal because they foolishly follow a false god. I believe, in this passage, the writer is more subtly mocking the Persian court for their foolish panic, something that is characteristic of people who do not know the Lord. Those who do not fear God often fear many other things. Things of which those who fear the Lord have no reason to be afraid.

I think another way this chapter subtly mocks the Persian court is when he records Memucan's words,

Esther 1:19 Let a royal order go out from the King, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed."

This is something we see in the book of Daniel as well. The Persians tried to pretend their laws were somehow permanent. Laws that could not be changed, were maybe even eternal. Yet, every faithful Jew and faithful Christian should laugh at such a thought. It is only the Law of God that cannot change. Only the Law of God is not susceptible to human whim and inconsistency.

How foolish it is to trust in the laws of the Persians and Medes, rather than the law of the Lord. The court of King Ahasuerus consisted of the most powerful men on the planet. Yet, because they did not know, trust, and serve God, they are best described as fools.

#2: Amidst all human flaws, frailty, and foolishness, God accomplishes His purposes. The decree that Memucan recommends is Esther 1:19b that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she."

Okay – spoiler alert for those of you who do not know the Book of Esther: she is the woman who will take Vashti's place as queen and because she is in that role, Esther will be able to accomplish the purpose God has: saving God's people, the Jews.

When Memucan gives the King this advice, he has no idea what God's purpose is. When the King issues the edict, he has no idea what God's purpose is. But that does not stop God from using their choices to accomplish His will.

That is what we call Divine Providence: God working through choices we as human beings freely make to accomplish His purpose, even if the people making the choices are completely unaware of that purpose.

Numerous, rather remarkable, coincidences have occurred throughout history. Such as: John Adams and Thomas Jefferson dying on the same day: July 4, 1826; 50 years to the date when they

had both signed The Declaration of Independence.

Or how Edwin Booth saved the life of Robert Lincoln, less than a year before his brother, John Wilkes Booth, killed Robert's father, Abraham Lincoln.

Well, Esther is a series of remarkable coincidences. As we go through this book, I encourage you to note the number of times where "it just so happens" that an event occurs that plays a key role in the story.

The King getting drunk is maybe the first one. If he would have stayed sober, Vashti, not Esther, would have been the Queen. This is God's providence at work, and the book of Esther really does involve a series of remarkable providences.

Okay, those two main points from our text lead us to these lessons for us to apply:

#1 – do not be foolish and overreact to different situations. Do not panic. Do not follow the example of the King's advisors and turn one little event into a kingdom-wide crisis.

Right now, overreaction almost seems to be the norm, especially in the political realm. It occurs on both sides of the political divide, though the response of pro-choice folks to the Supreme Court overturning Roe v Wade is an example of a huge overreaction.

Yet, there is plenty of overreaction in other places and we sometimes pay a high price when we respond that way. Overreactions happen in families; parents sometimes do that. 11-year-old Joey steals a candy bar from the local convenience store and mom decides Joey is destined for a life of crime and will be sentenced to 30 years in federal prison by the time he turns 18 unless she grounds him for the next six months.

Now, stealing that candy bar is not inconsequential. A good parent will make sure Joey realizes he did something wrong, experiences some form of punishment, and learns from his mistake.

Yet, parents always need to remember that children and teens are going to do things they

should not do, sometimes because they lack maturity and good judgement, or sometimes because they are sinners, just like everyone else on the planet.

Parents should also work on avoiding overreactions when relating to adult children. I often find it amusing, as the Progressive commercials remind us, how much like their parents young adults can be.

Yet, when a son or daughter chooses to vote for a different candidate than we do, attend a different kind of church than we do, or even cheer for a different football team than we do, it is important not to overreact. Maintaining a positive relationship despite differences needs to be the priority.

Now, there are good reasons to be concerned about adult children: when a son or daughter stops attending church and starts expressing doubts about the Bible, about Christianity, or even the existence of God, it is time to be concerned, but overreaction is not the answer.

Doubts do not equal unbelief. Questions and conversations are almost always a better response than shock and outrage. In these relationships, and really any relationships we have with other people, it is important to exhibit patience and follow the instructions the Lord gives us in James 1:19b Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry,"

This is especially true within the church. Some folks overreact whenever there are any doctrinal differences within a congregation. It is so important that both pastors and congregations be committed to sound doctrine and be diligent at rejecting false teaching that denies Biblical truth. But we need to be careful not to overreact when someone does not dot their theological "I"s or cross their theological "T"s in the exact way we do. For example: some Christians do not recognize baptism unless it is done in a stream. Baptism in a lake is not good enough because Jesus was baptized in the River Jordan. Folks, that is majoring on a minor. Do not forget that the only thing the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 cared about was that the water was wet!

We especially need to be careful not to overreact when other Christians make different decisions

than we do about "gray matters". Issues on which the Bible does not clearly speak. In Romans 14, the Apostle Paul gives us some pretty clear instructions about how to deal with those situations: allow the other person to follow his/her conscience and do not condemn or judge that individual.

Sure, you can have a discussion with that person and explain why you think he/she is making a wrong decision, but if it is not issue on which the Bible speaks clearly, that person should be following his/her conscience, not yours. And always keep in mind Romans 14:17 The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking but of righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit."

So, do not overreact when your Christian brothers or sisters have different opinions than you.

#2 – trust God to work out His purposes in your life. This is not a call to complacency. The Lord does not want you to just sit around and let life happen to you, but He does want you to trust Him.

Whenever we find ourselves in seemingly random situations or in circumstances beyond our control, which we are not excited about, we need to view these not just as irritations, but as opportunities from the Lord, opportunities to honor Him and serve other people. For example, some of you in recent travels have had the experience of delayed or cancelled airline flights. That can be a very frustrating experience. Yet, whenever that happens it is always helpful to ask yourself, "Okay, when did God know my flight today was going to be cancelled?" If you answer anything less than a billion years: wrong answer!

God always knew the flight was going to be cancelled. So why didn't He do something about it? Why didn't He at least warn you so you could have booked a flight with another airline? Well, maybe because He wants you to do something during the six hours you will be stuck in the airport waiting for the next flight. Something, that is, besides grumble and complain. Maybe there is someone in the airport with whom He wants you to have a conversation. Maybe there is someone on the next flight with whom you are supposed to have a talk. Maybe there are some

phone calls you are supposed to make during the six hours wait. Maybe there is a book you have intended to read and now you finally have some time to do that.

It may not seem there is an opportunity for any significant act on your part. Yet, remember the ripple effects of even very small choices can be huge, and it is God, not you, who knows what the impact of those decisions will be.

Friends, I suspect everyone of us wish that some circumstance in our life was different. Maybe you are single and would like to be married, or maybe you are married and wish you were single. Not good. Maybe you wish you had a different job, or that you could afford to retire, or that you could move to a different house, or that you were at a different college, or that you were cheering for a different football team (actually, you could change that right now!)

The point is, whatever your circumstance, in whatever time and place you happen to be, the Lord, in His providence, is giving you an opportunity, right now, to do His will. May the Lord help you to do that today, by His grace and for His glory.