



## **A New Look at Esther**

Simi Hills Sunday School • 2017

Class 1

**Miss Persia**

*Esther 1:1 through 2:18*

- I tend to have a Pious Bias when it comes to the Bible, and I tend to think that everyone in there is righteous
- When I come to Jonah and Job's friends, it becomes obvious that I need to rethink...
- I've slowly been changing my mind about Esther
- Some of the varnish has worn off, and I'm starting to no longer see her as a woman of faith and piety
- The Book of Esther is a wonderful compliment to the books of Ezra and Nehemiah
- Ezra and Nehemiah depict the return of godly Jews to the Promised Land, under divinely appointed leaders
- The Book of Esther makes a unique contribution to our understanding of this period in Israel's history
- It depicts the lives of those Jews who stayed on in Persia during this same period of time

- The focus of this book is upon those Jews who knew that God had instructed them to return to the Promised Land, but did not
- This book is about unfaithful Jews
- The deliverance of the Jews in the Book of Esther is not due to man's piety, but solely to God's grace, in spite of Israel's sins
- According to Hebrew tradition, the three most beautiful women ever to live were: Sarah, Bathsheba and Esther
- I don't think that it's important to talk about physical beauty, as that isn't the most important part of a person
- But, when your beauty is as exceptional as Esther's, it does play a part in the story
- The book starts out at a feast, and not your normal feast
- **SLIDE**
- Esther 1:1-4
  - 1) Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over **127 provinces**,
  - 2) in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel,
  - 3) in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his **officials and servants**. The **army** of Persia and Media and the **nobles and governors** of the provinces were before him
  - 4) while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, **180 days**
- We don't know how many people were there
- We know that he had 127 provinces
- One would assume that each province had some officials, so it was probably huge
- We do know how long it was...
- King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes had been in power for three years

- Ahasuerus is the fourth king of the Persians
- The great king, the one of whom Daniel had prophesied:
- **SLIDE**
- Daniel 11:2
  - 2) “And now I will show you the truth. Behold, three more kings shall arise in Persia, and a **fourth shall be far richer than all of them**. And when he has become strong through his riches, he shall stir up all against the kingdom of Greece.
- We don’t know why Ahasuerus held a six month long party, but it seems clear his intent was to display his power and glory to those in his kingdom
- As the six months drew to a close, yet another banquet is described
- This banquet is shorter - a mere seven days - and for the benefit of all the men who dwelled in Susa, rich and poor alike
- **SLIDE**
- Esther 1:5
  - 5) And when these days were completed, the king gave for **all the people** present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for **seven days** in the court of the garden of the king’s palace.
- To say that the party was lavish is an understatement
- This isn’t a tent with folding tables like we are used to
- To top it all off, the wine was served in vessels which were each priceless works of art
- This was the point of the banquet; the king was letting everyone know he was richer and more powerful than anyone else
- Plenty of liquor had flowed over the previous week, and the text informs us the king had his share of it
- The King sent for Vashti to appear before the men who were gathered with him

- From the way it is told, it looks like he planned this as the grand finale
- From what we are told, she was not instructed with regard to her dress other than she should appear wearing her royal crown
- She was summoned to display her royal beauty
- The king was not asking; he was summoning his queen
- But neither was he demanding she do anything demeaning to herself
- She was to appear in all her glory to bring glory to the king
- I don't think that we need to read a great deal into this text
- We do not really know what prompted the queen to respond as she did
- If you've been to any parties in your youth, you will note that women are no less likely to over-indulge and act inappropriately than men
- Vashti is certainly not cast in a favorable light
- She coolly rejects the command of her husband and her king to appear in her royal splendor
- The king gets advice from his counselors
- **SLIDE**
- Esther 1:19
  - 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**.
- The king may have been "**merry**" from the wine he had consumed, but he was now just plain mad
- Imagine how humiliating this would have been for Ahasuerus

- His purpose in all of the festive events of the past six months was to impress his guests with his great wealth and power
- And now, during the closing ceremonies of this six-month extravaganza, the king's own wife snubs him, refusing to honor or obey him and thereby embarrassing him before all of his guests
- The king was angry at Vashti, but he did not lose control
- He did not demand that she be put to death nor decide her fate at that moment
- He called for his chief counselors and asked them what he should do
- When their advice was given, the king heeded it, carrying it out as they recommended
- Note: This isn't biblical advice
- Let's be clear that this advice was intended to pander to the pride of men and keep women in a lower, subjected position
- They took this job of finding a new Queen seriously
- Remember that the feast was held in the **third year** of the King
- Notice when Esther is finally brought before the King
- **SLIDE**
- Esther 2:16

16) And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the **seventh year** of his reign

- Not only was it an involved process to find the best women, but then serious effort was taken into grooming them, training them and perfecting them
- This is the kind of thing that Kings who have too much money and too much time do
- The most beautiful young virgins in his kingdom were brought before him, and the plan was for him to try out each and every one of them

- Among the contestants was a beautiful young Jewess, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah and whose Persian name was Esther
- The only qualities mentioned regarding Esther are physical
- Did you notice what it says about Esther in Verse 15?

- **SLIDE**

- Esther 2:15

15) When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was **winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her.**

- I do not think this is the same as saying that Esther found favor in the eyes of all who *knew* her
- If the Bible teaches us anything, it tells us to judge a person in terms of their character, not according to their beauty or charm

- **SLIDE**

- 1st Samuel 16:7

7) But the Lord said to Samuel, "**Do not look on his appearance** or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the **Lord looks on the heart.**"

- **SLIDE**

- Luke 16:15

15) And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For **what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.**

- Esther won the heart of king Ahazuerus

- **SLIDE**

- Esther 2:17

17) The king loved Esther **more than all the women**, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

- In her honor, and in celebration of the event, the king gave yet another banquet, the fourth in these first two chapters of Esther
- It really plays like a fairy tale... “Once upon a time . . .” and ends “. . . happily ever after”
- But before we feel too good about what we have read, let’s give it a little more thought
- Here are seven questions with which to begin our discussion:

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(1) Why is the name of God never mentioned in the Book of Esther?

- **SLIDE**

(2) Why is prayer never specifically mentioned in the book?

- **SLIDE**

(3) Why does the New Testament never mention or refer to anything concerning the Book of Esther?

- **SLIDE**

(4) The Book of Esther gives the historical basis for the feast of Purim. Why is this feast never mentioned anywhere else in the Bible?

- **SLIDE**

(5) Since the book concerns Jews living outside the promised land, why is there never any mention of God’s Law, of the Holy Land, or of Jerusalem and the temple?

• **SLIDE**

- (6) Why are we so easily inclined to look upon King Ahasuerus as evil and to view Mordecai and Esther as godly?

• **SLIDE**

- (7) Why are we happy to see Esther on the throne, even though she has misrepresented her nationality and kin, is living outside the promised land, and is married to a heathen king, the winner of a contest which included sleeping with the king?

- Something is drastically wrong with God's people as represented in the Book of Esther
- We should not delight in Esther's "success" in becoming queen; we should be distressed
- Consider the Book of Esther in the light of these seven observations, which come from the rest of the Old Testament

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- (1) From the very beginning of God's dealings with the patriarchs and then with Israel, God promised to dwell among His people in the promised land of Israel, and specifically in the temple in Jerusalem  
Genesis 28:10-19, Exodus 15:17, Numbers 35:34, Deuteronomy 12:5  
Deuteronomy 12:11

• **SLIDE**

- (2) When the people of Israel sinned and were thrust out of their land, they were to look toward Jerusalem and the temple and pray to the Lord  
1<sup>st</sup> Kings 8:33-53

• **SLIDE**

- (3) While God indicated that the nation Israel would sin and be driven from the promised land and taken captive in a foreign land, He also promised that He would bring them back to the land of promise  
Deuteronomy 30:1-5



- **SLIDE**

- (4) The prophet Jeremiah did instruct the Israelites to settle themselves in Babylon for a 70 year sojourn, but then they were to return to the promised land  
Jeremiah 29:1-7 & Jeremiah 29:10-14

- **SLIDE**

- (5) In captivity, the righteous did not forget their land or the temple but yearned for it  
Psalm 137:1-9

- **SLIDE**

- (6) While in captivity, those who were godly purposed not to defile themselves but to live according to their faith and the Word of God  
Daniel 1:8 – Compare Daniel 1 to Esther 1 – Daniel is not afraid of the consequences of revealing his identity as a faithful follower of Yawhew, but Esther conceals her identity and lives as though she were a Persian

- **SLIDE**

- (7) At the end of 70 years, God moved in the heart of Cyrus to make a decree that all the Jews could return to their land, just as the prophet Jeremiah prophesied  
Jeremiah 30:1-4 & 2<sup>nd</sup> Chronicles 36:21-23

- **SLIDE**

- Ezra and Nehemiah are the account of the godly Jews who returned to the promised land and who sought to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple amidst great difficulty and opposition

- **SLIDE**

- Esther, on the other hand, is an account of those who became too attached to the land of their sojournings and thus disobeyed God by not returning when it was not only allowed, but commanded
- It is in the light of the rest of the Old Testament Scriptures that we can see the Book of Esther for what it is and appreciate its unique message and contribution

- **SLIDE**

- While Ezra and Nehemiah focus on the return to the land by the faithful remnant, Esther depicts the fate of those who remain in the land of their captivity
- We should not expect Mordecai and Esther to be godly Jews, for they are living in disobedience
- No wonder there is no mention of God, and no wonder that Esther's Persian name is the name of a heathen God, Ishtar

- **SLIDE**

- Why has God inspired and preserved this book as a part of the Old Testament canon?
- What does it have to say to us?

- **SLIDE**

- First, it is a warning to those of us who live our lives not as **“strangers and pilgrims,”** but as citizens of an earthly realm

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- Second, it warns us not to forget where our **“home”** is and to live in a way that makes us eager to leave this world and go home
- It cautions us about getting caught up in what the world views as success, so that we actually rejoice over Esther's rise to power and prominence and prosperity no matter how she got there

- **SLIDE**

- Third, it teaches us that even when we are unfaithful, God remains faithful to His Word and to His covenant promises
- The Book of Esther is about the sinfulness of those Jews who did not return to the promised land and about God's providential care of His people, not because of the sins of His people, but in spite of them
- Sadly, God is not mentioned in Esther, because God is not thought of in Esther

- These “people of God” lived their lives as though there was no God
- They were practical atheists, seeking to get ahead or to survive by their own wits and cunning, rather than living by God’s Word and trusting Him to deliver them by His power
- The book does not flatter the Persian Jews, nor should it
- But it does too often describe us and the condition of our cold hearts
- Heeding the lessons learned from the Book of Esther should help us forsake the cares of this world and cling to Him who has prepared the way to the next