

ESTHER'S SECRET (SUNDAY 1 OF DYNASTY AND DESTINY SERIES)

ESTHER 1 AND 2

WHY ESTHER?

1. **It is one of two books in the Bible** named for a woman **in which a woman is the central character of the book**.
2. In spite of attitudes about women throughout human history, **Esther** - and many other places in Scripture - **reminds us that there are NO second-class citizens in God's kingdom**.
3. In this study, we will get to see how Esther, memorialized in Scripture for her faithfulness, responded to various life events. [**We will see Esther's character, as well as that of the men around her**.] We will see her character, as well as the character of men surrounding her, and this will be instructive.
4. **We'll learn a little bit about ancient history**, and how Esther's life events fit with other historical events of that time.
5. We will see that, although the book is named for and written about a woman named Esther, **the true protagonist in this story is God**. God is arranging all the coincidences we will read about; preparing people's hearts and minds to accomplish His purposes not only in the moment, but generations down the line. //// Did you know that what you do in this moment can impact someone's life 10, 40, 100 years from now? We will see that happen in Esther's story and hopefully, we will be inspired to look beyond ourselves to see how we can make this nation and the world a better place now and in the future.

XERXES'S EXTRAVANGANZA (1:1-8)

Esther opens like a fairytale, because we are so far removed from it. Persia seems like a magical kingdom where everything seems to work out great. We don't meet Esther until chapter 2, because the author - who seems to have had firsthand knowledge of even miniscule details - apparently wanted to give us an appreciation for the setting of Esther's story.

As the curtain lifts, Xerxes is hosting a huge, lavish banquet at the end of a six-month military expo. History tells us that he had just overpowered Egypt, who thought they would try to exploit the Persian throne's vulnerability during his father Darius's illness and death. Now in a position of strength, Xerxes was plotting to go to war with Greece in order to avenge his father's defeat and humiliation from them at Marathon.

The empire of the Medes and the Persians, or the Persians and the Medes, didn't achieve empire status on the good looks of the king. Darius was a gifted administrator, and he handed his son Xerxes a well-oiled system that included great military might and for its time a very

sophisticated communication system. Edicts of the king, and news of the empire, traveled quickly as messengers were dispatched on swift horses and handed off information in a real life relay that moved lightning fast for those days.

As part of his planning and preparation for war - and in an effort to make sure all his troops were as loyal to him as they were to his father - Xerxes had his entire military winter with him in the citadel-fortressed royal city of Susa. They likely met from late September through March, and then (!) if that wasn't enough, Xerxes had all the hoi polloi of the kingdom and the military, as well as all the citizens of Susa, from least to greatest, at this huge weeklong banquet.

BANQUET BREWHAHA (1:10-22)

Notes in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, suggest that these were days of celebration for a recent royal wedding. Secular historians indicate this was preparation for war against Greece. Why not both? This would explain all the pomp and circumstance, and the big banquet brewhaha that led, eventually, to Esther's entrance into Xerxes' life.

On the last night of the banquet, Xerxes summoned his new bride Vashti, the official Queen of Persia. He instructed her to wear her new royal crown and come before all his guests - all men - by now drunk and aggressive - and display her beauty.

- She was holding a banquet of her own and was hosting all the wives of the military generals, governors, prefects, and satraps of Persia, as well as all the matrons and young maidens of Susa.
- She and Xerxes may have been married just before this big six month military expo and it's possible that she was already carrying the king's son.
- By all accounts, she had a fiery temper anyway so she may have already had enough.

We don't know the reason, it may be all of the above, but when Xerxes summoned her, she told him to go pound sand. This was unheard of in Persia! To make matters worse, both the invitation and refusal were very public. Xerxes found himself in quite a conundrum. His wife refused his request in front of all of his leaders, and - on the other side of the palace, all the wives of his leaders knew it and were no doubt anxious to see what would happen. Letting this go could mean a great disruption in the social fabric of his empire. In any other kingdom, under any other king, this would have been the end of Vashti's life. Xerxes wouldn't even put

that option on the table, though. Maybe he knew she was pregnant? But he had to do damage control, and do it fast. He couldn't have the wives of his generals refusing to obey their husbands on the eve of war with Greece!

Listening to the voices of his advisers, he banished Vashti from being able to enter his presence on her own and demoted her from her position as official Queen. Xerxes didn't have time for this drama anymore anyway, he had a war to fight that would take him three or four years, so off he went. Many scholars say that the Persian assault on Greece, which began with huge victories but went out whimpering with retreats and defeats after the Greeks cut his supply line, happened between chapters 1 and 2 of Esther.

ESTHER, WILL YOU ACCEPT THIS ROSE? (2:1-19)

Defeated and exhausted from the battles he had fought - and lost - Xerxes returned to Persia, to his summer home by the sea. His thoughts turned from making war to ... let's just say other pursuits... and that reminded him that he had no queen. No official queen? This had to be remedied quickly. So, with his approval of course, his advisers cooked up a scheme... and the original *Bachelor* series had its pilot - a good 2400 years before the invention of the television!

The next minute or two of this message may be rated pg-13 so parents... here we go :) . All of the eligible young maidens of the kingdom were invited to fly, drive, or push their way to Susa, where they would apply and be selected for the program. And if they were pretty enough, if they didn't apply they were invited anyway, in what was more like a draft. This was likely the case for Esther. The girls had 12 months of preparation, 6 months of softening and beautifying the skin with oil and myrrh and 6 months of perfume and cosmetics ... before they appeared before the king. In this version of the *Bachelor*, the girls' first meeting with the king was in the fantasy suite. After that, the girls went to a different harem and never appeared before Xerxes again unless he called for one of them by name.

Xerxes was so impressed with Esther that she made it through every rose ceremony and at last to the engagement ring finale. When they tied the knot, Xerxes threw another great banquet... there's lots of eating in Esther. (I'm surprised it's not more popular in churches haha.) At this banquet, the king gave lavish gifts to the people in attendance. Remember the old 'Oprah shows, "And *you* get a car, and *you* get a car..." So Esther became Queen of Persia.

There's really no other way to say this: Esther became Queen because she was beautiful. The Scriptures say that beauty is more than physical. In 1 Peter 3, we read that beauty is more than what you pile on your skin, it should first and foremost emanate from "...**your inner self**,

the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight." (1 Peter 3:4)

Esther's beauty was more than just skin deep. We see a pattern of teachability and even obedience in young Esther's life... she was most likely in her early to mid 20's - or even younger - when she won the king's heart. When she was in the harems, she won favor with the eunuchs. Now, a word here... these men had charge of hundreds of women who were kept for the king's pleasure - if you think that their hearts melted at puppy dog eyes or pouting lips, I think maybe you have another thing coming. They were wiser than that. If Esther was not teachable, coachable, and genuinely friendly, after a while the eunuchs wouldn't have given her the time of day. Instead, Hegai, the boss of the eunuchs, became impressed with Esther early on, and Esther was careful to ask his advice and follow his instructions.

12 At the end of the twelve months that were required for the women... the woman would go to the king in the following way: Whatever she asked for would be provided for her to take with her from the harem to the royal palace. ... 15 When it became the turn of Esther ... to go to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who was overseer of the women, had recommended. Yet Esther met with the approval of all who saw her. 17 And the king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she met with his loving approval more than all the other young women. So he placed the royal high turban on her head and appointed her queen in place of Vashti.

(Esther 2:12, 13, 15, 17, NET)

Esther, the new Queen of Persia, was a remarkable young woman. But she had a secret. Her cousin swore her to secrecy. **Esther's secret was that she was a Jew**, and secondly, that she was the cousin of Mordecai, who also kept his heritage secret. Why would she do this? That will be one of the things we discuss this Wednesday night at 7:30 on Facebook Live. :) But you know how you feel when you keep a secret like that? It doesn't always feel good, in fact, sometimes you're sure that if everyone else knew it... you would be cancelled. So you carry on, and keep your secret a secret.

Have you ever looked back on your life and thought, "How on earth did I get *here*?" And you thought of all the wrong moves, the twists and turns, the detours, the stupid choices, those moments when you caved to pressure, or you gave into temptation. Yet here you are. If you feel like you have made a mess of your life; like you've compromised too much and given too little; like you have to be constantly rerouted by your inner GPS and now you're hearing a voice from the ground level hiss at you, "there's no way God can use you! You have messed up way too much!" Look down at that slithering serpent and say, "Not today Devil! I am a child of

God! I know I've screwed up, cut up, fouled up, and messed up all my life but mercy has brought me here and I'm staying to find out what God has for me here!"

Esther's story teaches us that **even if the journey to your current location is rough or less than ideal, God can turn that situation around and make it your destiny.**

God can bring you to it. What you do once you get there determines if this is destiny or another detour.

CRUSHED CONSPIRACY (2:21-23)

Mordecai, Esther's cousin, worked hard, kept his head down and soon rose in the ranks of the king's officials. He may have been a judge or a gatekeeper but he also knew how to listen. One day, he listened to two of the king's bodyguards who had become disenfranchised with Xerxes. Maybe they felt he mismanaged the war, or maybe they were disgusted that he was more interested in the affairs of his harem than he was affairs of state. These two men, well-connected and well-armed, were plotting the assassination of King Xerxes!

Mordecai informed Esther, and Esther quickly took the news to the King, giving Mordecai full credit for the intel. Xerxes' life was saved, and the plotting bodyguards met a just end. It was momentous enough that the official palace historians wrote about it in the king's official chronicles. Next week we will see how even that detail is something God used for His purposes.

As we conclude our time today we're going to sing a couple of great songs that speak of God's faithfulness to us even in moments when we can't see Him at work. And that's one of the prevailing themes in Esther's story. Our closing hymn, "He Leadeth Me" was written by a pastor who was asked to preach in a leading church in Philadelphia during the Civil War. Philadelphia, of course, was deeply embroiled in the war, a main supply hub for weapons, medical supplies, and food for the Union Army, and home to two military hospitals. Joseph Gilmore was seeking to bring encouragement and comfort to the people in the church where he was guest pastor so he thought he would preach on Psalm 23:2, "He leadeth me beside the still waters." Not feeling much stillness in his soul, he began to meditate on this verse and wrote that he couldn't get past the first three words: He leadeth me.

In his own words: "It was the darkest hour of the Civil War. I did not refer to that fact—that is, I don't think I did—but it may subconsciously have led me to realize that God's leadership is the one significant fact in human experience, that it makes no difference how we are led, or whither we are led, so long as we are sure God is leading us."

An orphaned, ethnic minority girl is adopted by a single male cousin. Somehow they survive her childhood and teenage years together and alive. When the Queen is deposed, a national search is made for a new Queen. This orphaned minority girl was spotted for her beauty, and drafted into this search. Out of all the eligible girls, girls from noble families, girls with powerful connections, and girls who absolutely worshiped Xerxes, this orphaned minority girl was selected. One of the first things she does as wife of the king is inform her husband about a plot to kill him. Esther is discovering her destiny in the dynasty. But she's not finished yet, and neither is God.

God can bring you to your current location. God can even drop opportunities in your lap. But it's what you do with your location and those opportunities that can make where you are now your destiny. And it makes you available for what God wants to do *next* in your life. So, what will you do today?

[prayer]