

“QUEEN VASHTI REFUSES KING AHASUERUS’ REQUEST.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Esther 1:10-22

Esther 1:10-12, the king’s request, the queen’s refusal.

The first nine verses of Esther serve as a kind of preface or introduction. They are setting the stage for the story that really begins in this evening’s text. Now things start happening, the dominos start to fall.

For 187 days the greatest king of the greatest empire has been throwing a lavish Bacchanalian feast for hundreds or thousands of guests. The party doubled as a war council to impress all the leaders of the empire of the king’s resources and resolve to pick a fight with the Greeks.

Everything so far is meant to impress them and us of his vast wealth, power and authority. But the balloon of the king’s ego is about to be popped. For all his pomp and power, he can’t control his wife or make her bend to his will.

The king and his subjects have been drinking for seven days. Everyone is merry with wine, which is a nice way of saying drunk out of their minds.

On the seventh day the king commands his seven court officials, “to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at.”

If anyone has not been impressed over the last 187 days of partying, well wait until you see this. The king is treating her like one of his possessions to be shown off and displayed. She is one more object to show his power and wealth. She is his prized possession to do as he wishes which in this case is to be gawked at by a bunch of drunken, lecherous men.

Some think the request was to come wearing only her crown, others that she was to come unveiled, and others just to be paraded as his trophy wife. He wants her to come and show off her body to a huge room full of men.

It is not clear exactly what he wants her to do, but however scandalous the order the brave queen refuses to obey. She refuses to come. We are not told specifically why.

Clearly she is a strong minded independent-thinking woman who had the strength of character and personal dignity to stand up to the folly of her drunk husband.

In a culture where it was not uncommon to treat women with this much disrespect, Queen Vashti must have stood out for her strength of character and morality, especially when she certainly knew there would be a price to pay. She was prepared to endanger her life by refusing the king's command. She was not impressed by his wealth or the position she had because of him.

The king who rules over 127 provinces stretching from India to north Africa, the king who after six months of basking in the glory of his own power and wealth and fame, who after six months of nothing but adulation and praise and being thought well of, has the façade of his power and authority unraveled in about six minutes.

Esther 1:13-22, the King's ridiculous reaction: ramifications and repercussions.

Ideas and actions have consequences.

Persian kings were absolute monarchs with virtually unlimited authority and power. They gave little or no thought or regard for others. With what happens to Vashti we are meant to remember when Esther comes on the scene she will be up against tremendous odds. Hers will be a story about overcoming insurmountable odds.

The king's reaction is very telling. We see the façade of his life, he is insecure and impotent. He throws a temper tantrum, like a spoiled child who doesn't get what he wants.

Instead of realizing his own folly, he doubles down in anger and turns a mole hill into a mountain. He was foolish to ask his wife in the first place and now he is foolish to drag everyone into it.

For all his bravado and show, he does nothing without consulting with others, yet another sign of the weakness of his character and leadership. He turns to his seven advisors of whom Memucan seems to be the chief advisor. These are princes, leaders, the wise men who knew the times.

A domestic dispute becomes a state crisis. This would be something like the President of the US finding out his child got called to the principal's office and he calls an emergency meeting of National Security Council.

When people's ego gets wounded they can lose all sense of proportion and here we see how fragile his is. There is much *irony* here. This is a form of Jewish humor that makes fun of adversaries they also fear. We are invited to laugh at the folly of all involved.

First, the king asked for legal advice and none is given. But this time when he doesn't get what he asked for, instead of being angry, he is pleased.

Second, the queen's punishment is actually what she wanted. She didn't want to come into the king's presence and now she can't. He divorces his wife for one act of refusal and banishes her to the harem of concubines.

As Christians we are reminded here that standing up for what is right or having integrity or purity, or resisting worldly pressures or temptations doesn't necessarily mean we will be honored or respected or end up in a better place.

Someone in authority over us could demand something of us that we in good conscience cannot do, and we must refuse, knowing full well the result may not be positive, but we refuse anyway. We must be willing to bear the consequences of a conscience and the conviction to stand firm.

Third, since the king can't control his own wife, their advice is to try and control everyone else's wife by some decree. This is more arrogance since respect can't be legislated.

Finally, the greatest irony of all. The fear is that Vashti's refusal might become known to all women and lead to contempt on the part of wives toward their husbands, so what do they do? Instead of it trickling by gossip, they make what Vashti did known to everyone in the empire by royal edit.

They make the king to look like an even bigger fool in the eyes of all his subjects. The royal decree is sent to every province translated into every language of the empire.

Memucan blows it completely out of proportion, suggesting her refusal could rip apart the very fabric of the entire empire and start some sort of a great feminist uprising.

Memucan's plans are full of folly but God is setting the stage for a great reversal, to overcome the evil plans of another foolish and insecure leader.

Stay tuned. Until then consider with me a few implications from our text for our time.

Implications and application.

Concerning power.

History is filled with terrible abuses of power, that last century alone saw an overwhelming number of deaths, violence, abuse, from Stalin, Lenin, Mussolini, Hitler, Marcos in Philippines, Noriega in Panama, Khomeini in Iran, Huessin in Iraq, Pol Pot in Cambodia and Idi Amin in Uganda.

There have been abuses in numerous presidencies and even in the Christian church.

Kim Jung Un of seems like a modern Ahasuerus. He is the self-declared supreme leader of North Korea with all power and authority, making a show of his military might, while showing little regard for the desperate needs of his people.

There is only one king with perfect character who can wield perfect power. Even when tempted by Satan to use His power for His own personal gain, Jesus refused. Jesus calls us to be like Him in the use of power and not lord it over others, but serve one another.

Authority is given to serve others, not one's self. Jesus condemns abusive and self-serving leadership at the national level and in the church and in the home.

Concerning home and marriage.

Speaking of the home, what's wrong with the king's request of his wife?

First, it is not made in love, but out of lust or pride or power. He is not acting in the best interest of his wife which is what love does.

Second, he is not protecting his wife, he is not defending her purity and honor. He shows no care for her in wanting to parade her as a sex object and expose her to shame just to impress his friends. He is not honoring the marriage bed. Her beauty was her own and her husband's, it was not open for show among hundreds of drunk men.

It boggles my mind that famous athletes and movie and music stars let immodest pictures of their wives be posted on the internet. How is that protecting and honoring?

Third, he not acting like Christ would toward her, which is the model for Christian husbands.

Yes, husbands are to exercise spiritual headship and authority in the home, to which wives are to submit and show respect or deference. But husbands are to lead after the manner of Christ, in love and self-sacrifice, putting her needs and desires above his own.

The great mystery of marriage revealed in the NT is that marriage is created to be a God-glorifying reflection of the relationship that exist between Christ and His Bride, the church.

Jesus is a king who has a Bride who He is calling to a feast. He doesn't just send servants, He comes Himself with the invitation. And even when His invitation was rejected He didn't banish her, but suffered and sacrificed for her.

We should not be like Vashti in refusing Jesus' request to come to His feast, the marriage supper of the Lamb. His invitation is not to shame, but to lavish on us grace and mercy, to crown us and cloth us in His righteousness.

Those who refuse will be banished from the presence of the king forever.

Anyone who thinks Vashti should have submitted to this request does not understand Biblical submission. Submission to any human is never absolute, it is always subordinate to God and His Word. When anyone in authority over us asks us to do something contrary to God's Word, then we have no choice but to refuse and then suffer whatever consequences may come.

The unholy demands of an ungodly husband do not have to be obeyed.

Concerning God's providence.

Proverbs 21:1 The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

Behind King Ahasuerus' drunken folly and inappropriate request and burning rage and ridiculous reaction is the unseen hand of God controlling an out of control king.

Ahasuerus may have all the money in the world, he may have great military power at his fingertips, he may be surrounded with many advisors, but how fragile is his authority and control.

There is an unseen power and authority behind all of this. Persia and Ahasuerus are nothing. Kings and presidents and dictators and tyrants may seem to be able to do as they wish with impunity.

God is always at work, even in the most godless and pagan rulers and countries. God is always purposefully ordering and arranging all things for His glory and for His redemptive purposes.

When it seems God is most silent and most absent, when it seems God is not at work anywhere in the world, He is actually at work everywhere in the world.

No huge feast, no drunk king, no drunk king, no stupid order to his wife, no stupid order no refusal from his wife, no refusal no angry king, no angry king, no foolish counsel, no foolish counsel, no divorce, no divorce, no Esther, no Esther, no Jews.

This one event sets in motion a long chain of events that will eventually lead to the deliverance of the Jewish people.

It reminds us of a long chain of ordinary events over thousands of years that lead up to the birth of Christ and the redemption of God's people.

Someone once said, "If I were as sovereign as God, I would change a lot of things, If I were as wise as God, I would not change a single thing."

God has a plan for his people and their preservation and joy and growth. That plan involves tyrants like King Ahasuerus and even Kim Jung-un.

Veiled from view is the providential hand of a sovereign God ruling and overruling a drunk king and his vulgar desires, a courageous queen risking her future, a host of wise men who proved to be foolish and self-serving, and all the events that unfold for the placing of a new queen who would save her people.

The Jews would have had little or no interest in what was happening in the palace. So the queen is deposed, what does that have to do with them? They have no clue that God is already moving events on their behalf, something they will only see in hindsight.

Who knows how events today will impact our future? Seemingly ordinary events may be extraordinary providences of God.

Geoff Thomas:

Thomas Watson says, "God always has a hand in the action where the sin is, but he never has a hand in the sin of the action." It doesn't matter what happened, where it happened, when it happened, or to whom it happened. If it took place at all then it didn't happen in a vacuum. God had a hand in it; God controlled it all, but he is never guilty of the sin of the action. It is impossible for God to sin. He never tempts people to act sinfully. The contemptuous drunken anger and hurt pride in Xerxes that made him decide to divorce Vashti – God was not guilty of that sin. That was Xerxes' sin alone.

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