

*In the late 60's, Frank Sinatra made popular a song titled "My Way." It was something of an ode to self-sufficiency and self-governance, and I want to read a part of it:*

*Regrets, I've had a few  
But then again, too few to mention  
I did what I had to do  
And saw it through without exemption  
I planned each charted course  
Each careful step along the byway  
And more, much more than this  
I did it my way*

*Yes, there were times, I'm sure you knew  
When I bit off more than I could chew  
But through it all, when there was doubt  
I ate it up and spit it out  
I faced it all, and I stood tall  
And did it my way*

Last week we began our study of the book of **Esther** where we learned a few things about this book. It's the only book in the Bible where God is not mentioned. God is not mentioned even once, in fact, no one in the book is even recorded seeking God or appealing to Him for guidance or help. There are no calls for worship, no mention of faith, no counsel from a prophet, and there are no reports of miracles, and maybe, just maybe, none of these things are mentioned in Esther because God's people – a remnant who lived in Persia, had become so influenced by that culture, that they lived as if God really didn't matter – instead, just like in the song, *they did it their way*. That could very well be the case here, but in spite of that – in the end, God will still have His way.

Now as we first dived into the story last week, we were introduced to Ahasuerus who was also known as Xerxes by the Greeks. Ahasuerus was the King of Persia, a very powerful king, a working king who built a great empire – the greatest the world had ever seen. Ahasuerus apparently had a lot of stuff – he liked to show it off, and throwing a big party gave him an opportunity to do so. During one such party – a seven-day party, the king gathers everyone in the palace, both great and small, to celebrate. At this party, there was an open bar, and the men were getting smashed, to include the king, and on the last day of this party, according to Jewish history, in order to settle an argument as to which country had the most beautiful women, the king commands that his wife, Queen Vashti be brought out and

paraded before the drunken men. Well, to the surprise of everyone, she refuses. She publicly defies the king's command. It's an embarrassing scandal for the king – he looks really bad, he gets really mad, and under the advice of his counselors, as a consequence, Vashti is removed from her role as queen, and that brings us to **Esther 2** – but before we go there, I need to set it up.

King Ahasuerus wanted to conquer Greece to avenge his father's defeat years earlier, and so with careful planning with his civic leaders and military commanders, he prepares for the invasion by amassing a huge army of over 200,000 soldiers – some say a million soldiers, and he has a naval fleet of about 1200 ships. So, as planned, Ahasuerus invades Greece – but things didn't go as planned. The boxer, Mike Tyson once said, *"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the face."* Ahasuerus had a plan, but apparently, he underestimated the fighting skill, the fighting strategy, and the fighting spirit of the Spartans.

An example of this would be the famous Battle of Thermopylae where the Greeks found themselves overwhelmed by the Persians, so King Leonidas and 300 Spartan warriors, and a few others, held off the Persians at a narrow pass for a few days so the bulk of the Greek army could escape to safety and regroup. Then there was the Battle of Salamis where the Persian navy suffered a defeat.

Now, Ahasuerus did have some success and he was able to march into Athens and set the city on fire, but eventually he suffered the same fate as his father before him – and he had to return to Persia in defeat and disgrace.

So, maybe three years have passed between Chapter 1 and Chapter 2, and with that in mind, let's pick up the story with **verse 1**.

**After these things when the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.**

**After these things** – after his failed invasion of Greece, after his defeat, after his return to the palace in Susa – Ahasuerus needs comfort, he needs someone who understands him, he needs someone who cares for him and his feelings, he needs a hug, and he remembered **Vashti** – the queen he had kicked to the curb for defying his drunken command. Yes, the king had a harem of beautiful women at his disposal, but he misses Vashti – his special gal. The anger he once had towards her is now gone, he wishes he could go back and change things – but he can't. He had made a **decree** against her, and according to Persian law, he can't take it back. What's done is done.

The king is sulking, he's moping around the palace in depression, and those closest to him see it, and they devise a plan to cheer him up. Let's read on beginning with **verse 2**.

**<sup>2</sup> Then the king's attendants, who served him, said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. <sup>3</sup> Let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to the citadel of Susa, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given them. <sup>4</sup> Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti." And the matter pleased the king, and he did accordingly.**

So, here's the plan. Let's have a "Miss Persia" pageant. Let's search for the most beautiful young virgins in the empire – let's round them all up, gather them together in a **harem**, put them under the charge of **Hegai**, and the lucky one who **pleases the king** – and that's the goal here – she wins the contest and she will become the new queen.

Now in **verse 3**, it is explained how this will be carried out. The king would **appoint overseers** throughout the empire – talent scouts, and they would search out these young women for the king's pleasure. These young women would have no choice, no consent, and no control in the matter. If a talent scout liked what he saw, the young woman was drafted, taken into **custody**, and it was off to the palace in **Susa** she would go.

This plan was offered with the sole purpose of pleasing King Ahasuerus, and on the surface, this is hard to stomach but we must not forget that God is still in control here and is actively working behind the scenes, or said a little differently – *God is working behind what is seen*. God foresees all things, and because of that special foreknowledge – somehow, someway, He skillfully weaves the freewill choices and the actions and the events of people – good or bad, right or wrong to bring about His own divine purpose.

Remember, as I said last week, in this story, we are looking at the back side of a tapestry. The front side is a masterpiece as we will later see, but for now, what we see is the back side – a knotted, and tangled, and confusing mess made by people – not God.

Okay, let's continue on beginning with **verse 5**.

**<sup>5</sup> Now there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, <sup>6</sup> who had been**

**taken into exile from Jerusalem with the captives who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled. <sup>7</sup> He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother. Now the young lady was beautiful of form and face, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.**

In this passage we are introduced to a man named **Mordecai**, a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, a descendant of **Kish**.

We are told that Mordecai's family, probably referring to his great grandparents, had been exiled from Judah by the Babylonians long, long ago, and like so many of the Jews – they did not return to the Promised Land when given the opportunity. So that tells us, Mordecai has been raised in a foreign land all his life, and this is equally true for his younger cousin **Hadassah**. Hadassah is her Jewish name which means "*myrtle*", but her Persian name is **Esther** which means "*star*."

This is the first mention of Esther and we quickly learn that she was an orphan because her parents had died and her older cousin Mordecai was now raising her has his **own daughter**, and secondly, we are told that Esther was a beautiful young woman in both **form and face** – meaning she was beautiful from head to toe.

Now, at this point, neither Mordecai nor Esther have any knowledge of this Miss Persia beauty pageant. Esther is just living out her normal days in Susa, and then the unexpected happens.

Let's pick up beginning with **verse 8**.

**<sup>8</sup> So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to the citadel of Susa into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women. <sup>9</sup> Now the young lady pleased him and found favor with him. So he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem.**

With no choice, no consent, and no control in the matter, Esther was **taken** into custody – drafted with many other women into the king's harem by these talent scouts. Jewish historian Josephus claimed there were actually 400 who were taken to the king's palace against their will, where for a full year, these women would be sequestered and required to prepare themselves to please the king.

We are told that amongst all these beautiful women, Esther stood out to **Hegai** – the eunuch in charge of the harem. She **found favor with him**, which literally means “*she lifted up grace before his face,*” and as a result, she was immediately given special beauty preparations, she was provided with seven maids to look after her beauty needs and treatments, and she given the best place in the harem.

I don’t know about you, but to me – this whole situation seems very similar to the story of Joseph. If you remember way back in **Genesis** – against his will, Joseph was taken captive into Egypt and became a servant in Potiphar’s house, where he found favor and quickly became the head servant. Then, Joseph was falsely accused by Potiphar’s wife, he was sent to prison, where again, he found favor from all who interacted with him, and he gained status even in prison. Eventually, Joseph became the second in command in all of Egypt and he saved Israel from a terrible drought and starvation. Like Joseph, Esther was taken against her will, but she found favor with the one placed over her – *she lifted up grace before his face,* and she prospers despite her circumstances.

Now, in the next few verses, we learn that Esther has a secret to keep. Beginning with **verse 10**, we are told,

**<sup>10</sup> Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make them known. <sup>11</sup> Every day Mordecai walked back and forth in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and how she fared.**

Esther tells no one that she is a Jew, because Mordecai told her to keep that fact hidden. We are not told why, but maybe Mordecai had a better understanding of the times they were living in, maybe he recognized the resentment that was brewing towards the Jewish people, or maybe it was something entirely different, but for whatever reason, Esther was told to keep her family background a secret, and I think we can also conclude that she did not practice her Jewish faith, for that would have given her away as well.

So, Esther obeyed Mordecai, and obviously, Mordecai was concerned about her safety for we are told he paced **back and forth** in front of the place where she was housed to learn what was happening to her and how she was doing – **and how was she doing?**

Well, the next several verses tell us beginning with **verse 12**.

**<sup>12</sup> Now when the turn of each young lady came to go in to King Ahasuerus, after the end of her twelve months under the regulations for the women—for the days of their beautification were completed as follows: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and the cosmetics for women— <sup>13</sup> the young lady would go in to the king in this way: anything that she desired was given her to take with her from the harem to the king’s palace. <sup>14</sup> In the evening she would go in and in the morning she would return to the second harem, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not again go in to the king unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.**

Persia was one of countries famous for its perfumes and ancient customs for the preparations of brides, including ritualistic baths, plucking of the eyebrows, manicures, pedicures, the painting of hands and feet, facial make-up, and applications of a beautifying paste all over the body meant to lighten the color of the skin and to remove spots and blemishes.

For six months, it was treatments with **oil of myrrh**, which supposedly softens and smooths the skin, and then after that, it was another six months of being rubbed with **spices** and **cosmetics**. That’s a full year of beauty treatments, but there was another reason for this lengthy period of time – it would reveal if any of the women were pregnant when they were placed into the harem.

So, these women were given constant spa treatments for a year. No job, no cooking, no washing, no ironing, no errands – no responsibility other than to look and smell as good as possible. They were pampered, provided with the finest of clothing and jewelry, likely given courses in proper etiquette so as to appear and act like royalty – and all for the purpose of satisfying the pleasures of the king.

We are told that when the year was over, each woman would allow this king to take advantage of her during a one-night stand. The Miss Persia beauty pageant had turned into a sex contest and the king was the judge. The king would sleep with them, one by one – and in the end, the winner would become the new queen, while the rest of the women would be banished to another harem of **concubines** where they remained as second-class wives of the king – essentially living as unloved women, never free to marry another man or have a family of their own. That was the destiny of those who lost this beauty pageant.

Now, at some point, it was Esther’s turn, and this is what we are told beginning with **verse 15**,

**<sup>15</sup> Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai who had taken her as his daughter, came to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the women, advised. And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her.**

**<sup>16</sup> So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus to his royal palace in the tenth month which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. <sup>17</sup> The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. <sup>18</sup> Then the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his princes and his servants; he also made a holiday for the provinces and gave gifts according to the king's bounty.**

I want to be very careful as I tackle this passage because I don't want to say something that is not being said here.

We are told Esther is **taken** to the king – it's her turn now, but we are not told what she may have said, and we are not told what she may have done when she spent the night with the king. We are told that Esther, like all the other young women, could have taken anything she wanted with her to seduce and entice the king. She could have taken anything to use to her advantage to win the contest, but Esther only took with her what **Hegai** recommended she take.

So, it would appear that Esther approaches her situation differently, and she **found favor** in the eyes of all who saw her – to include the king. Ahasuerus **loved** her more than all the others, and she found **kindness with him**.

Esther, an orphaned child of Jewish exiles, raised by her older cousin, taken against her will and placed in a harem to please a pagan king – is publicly crowned by the king as the new queen of Persia.

What a great story so far. When Esther was drafted into the king's harem, for the king's pleasure, she had no idea what the future held for her. Esther no longer had plans of her own – how could she, but God had a plan for her, and unbeknownst to Esther, she was right in the middle of God's plan to deliver His people. God's people would be in danger – it's coming, but before the danger ever materialized, the invisible hand of God was already at work with a solution – Esther.

Esther had a place in God's plan, and in the same way, know it or not, believe it or not, we too have a place in His plan.

*In the opening pages of his autobiography "An American Life," Ronald Reagan writes,*

*“I was raised to believe that God had a plan for everyone and that seemingly random twists of fate are all a part of His plan. My mother, a small woman with auburn hair and a sense of optimism that ran as deep as the cosmos told me that everything in life happened for a purpose. She said, ‘all things were part of God’s plan – even the most disheartening setbacks, and in the end, everything worked out for the best.’ ‘If something went wrong’ she said, ‘you didn’t let it get you down – you stepped away from it, stepped over it, and moved on.’ Later on, she added, ‘something good will happen and you’ll find yourself thinking – if I hadn’t had that problem back then, then this better thing that did happen wouldn’t have happened to me.’*

*After I lost the job at Montgomery Ward, I left home again in search of work. Although I didn’t know it then, I was beginning a journey that would take me a long way from Dixon and fulfill all my dreams and then some. My mother, as usual, was right.”*

God has a plan, and you are in it.

Source Material:

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