

# The Miss Ancient World Competition

*Esther*

By Iain Wright

sermonaudio.com

**Bible Text:** Esther 2; Genesis 45:1-8

**Preached on:** Sunday, June 30, 2013

## **Covenant OPC**

9340 W 147th Street

Orland Park, Illinois 60462

**Online Sermons:** <http://www.sermonaudio.com/covenantopc>

I would like us this morning to continue our study in the book of Esther reflecting together upon the second chapter of the book that bears her name. The second chapter opens up to us with a statement that the king's anger had abated and that he had then remembered what had happened with regards to Vashti, that portion which we looked at last Lord's day in which you will recall Queen Vashti refused to come at the summons of her king and husband and, as a result, was deposed from being Queen.

As we take up the story, we see some things revealed to us about the nature of King Ahasuerus, also know as King Xerxes and if that name is familiar to you, I will jog your memory in just a moment. We see here that in the pages of Scripture, we are presented with a man who has considerable power and yet he doesn't use that power wisely. He is prone to anger and in that anger he takes decisions which later on he comes evidently to regret. He misses his Queen. There was a reason that she was Queen in the first place, and so he has now to do something about it.

But we can also see that he chooses his counselors poorly. We saw that last week in the first chapter when his counselors, concerned for their own well-being, did not deal with him as he should have been dealt with but according to what they thought was best for them. An in the second chapter we see that his counselors in terms of choosing his replacement Queen are the young men and their suggestion is that they should have something of a Miss Ancient World competition and the most beautiful women in the kingdom should be paraded before him and he chooses one of them to be Queen with him.

Now, you can just imagine just how shallow young men can be and here is a prime example of the shallowness of young men, "Choose your wife from the most beautiful women that you can find." But whatever the shallowness of the young men, it's the fact that the king listens to their advice that we find perplexing, even disturbing. In those who hold high office, we would expect and certainly desire a greater understanding.

Many years ago I am told of a story of a pastor who had a beauty competition and the only qualification for entry was that everyone present should be over the age of 70. His point was simply this: the beauty that young girls might have is not to be compared with that inner beauty of a life lived in the presence of God. If the Lord has blessed you as a

young girl with great beauty, well, your family and those who love you and hold you dear rejoice in that but it is not to be compared with the beauty of wisdom and of trusting in God.

But we see in King Ahasuerus that shallowness, that impetuosity, which was revealed to us in the first chapter. We see also in his circle of counselors those who are not prepared to speak to him of the needs of his soul. They seem every bit as shallow as he is himself. Where is the Nathan that would stand to speak to him as Nathan spoke to David? Who will bring before him the awfulness of his deeds and say, "Thou art the man"? There appears to be no one in the court of King Ahasuerus who will speak to him the words which he needs to hear.

Now, what is revealed to us in the word of God is not the full history of these times but if we could just flesh it out a little bit further so that we have an understanding of what's going on, some of these events not recorded in Scripture that are familiar to us from all places popular culture. About 490 BC, this same king had sought to invade Greece and was repulsed by the Greek states at the battle of Marathon. If that name is familiar to you it is because a runner came from the battlefield to tell the victorious Greeks that the Greeks had won and the distance from Marathon to the city of, I believe it was Athens though my mind is slipping me on that one, is the exact same distance. If you ever wondered why it was such an odd distance, it's because it was the distance from Marathon to Athens.

Well, 10 years later King Xerxes, as he's known to the Greeks, decided to try again and the ancient historians will tell you that he went into battle with about a million soldiers. Well, that seems highly, highly unlikely. It's more likely somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 is a more likely figure. And it's that army that comes against the king of Sparta and if you have seen advertisements or seen the movie "300," that's what that's based on. Now, I have to say that the history of that period is more exciting than the movie. The movie throws in a bunch of mythical creatures and there's no reason for it. If you've got an army of 180,000 taking on, well it wasn't actually 300, there were just 300 Spartans, about 1,700 other folk who don't seem to get a mention. perhaps that was just product placement for the Spartans. 2,000 against 180,000? Outnumbered 90 to 1? You don't need to bring in mythical beasts in order to spice up the story.

It is after that that King Xerxes returns to his capital and they may have, if you're remembering the battle, it's the battle of Thermopylae, Xerxes won that but ultimately he lost the war and came back defeated. Overwhelming numbers in an army do not guarantee victory and a lack of numbers does not guarantee defeat.

So Xerxes comes back to his capital and he remembers now that Vashti, that humanly speaking he might have sought comfort from, is no longer Queen and he turns to these shallow young men and says, "Let's just have a Miss Ancient World competition." But it is God who is in control and that's the theme even though it's unspoken of these chapters. We also find for those of us who have at least some knowledge of the Heidelberg catechism: God so preserves me that without the will of my Father, not a hair can fall

from my head yet all things must be subservient to my salvation. All things must be subservient to my salvation and that's what we will see in the book of Esther. Not just the spiritual things not, as it were, that time where we are awoken by the preaching of God's word, by the reading of Scripture, the light of the Gospel suddenly shines in upon a darkened heart. "Yes," you say, "that's the work of God. Whose work could it possibly be?" But it's in those seemingly ordinary events that God is also at work. When you say an army of 180,000 taking on a couple thousand in the past at Thermopylae is hardly an ordinary, everyday occurrence. No, but you don't need to read of it in your Scriptures, in fact, it's almost as though God leaves that to the secular historians because it's not important to God as far as the history of his dealing with God's people. That is incidental. It is the ordinary of the history books for as we see in Scriptures, when God wants to speak and show forth of his might and power, he doesn't point to armies even 180,000 strong. He takes Job out in a starry night and asks, "Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades?" He points him up to the night sky and looks at the stars and says, "Now look, look at that star system there. Can you bind the chains of the Pleiades or lose the cords of Orion?" So shall we tell God how to direct the affairs of nations?

Xerxes met with disappointment. He met with devastating reversals. And as we look back upon our lives, perhaps even upon our recent events, we can say, "Yes and I have met with my own disappointments too." Sometimes they may even rise to the level on a personal level of being a devastating reversal. I have no comfort were I the counselor of Xerxes to bring him but I have the comfort of God's word to bring to every believing soul.

"Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never failing skill,  
He treasures up his bright designs,  
And works his sovereign will."

What we have before us therefore in some sense is a secular history. It's not the sort of history that secular historians would balk at and say, "Well, it's speaking about God here and God has nothing really to do with history." Any self-respecting academic history book is not going to mention that God was at hand. Well, look at the book of Esther. Here is a history book that would not feel at all out of place on the shelves of any historian. It's just reporting what happened in the court of a king centuries ago, 2 1/2 thousand years ago.

Well, what is absent? What is absent for us is that there is no narrator to explain to us that behind the scenes God has ordered these events. Not once do you find God's name mentioned in the entirety of this book. There are no special signs, as it were, no miraculous events. There is no parting of the Red Sea to allow the children of Israel to go through on dry land, then consuming the chariots of Egypt. It was just one ordinary event which needs no miraculous intervention, no supernatural explanation after another and there are no hints in the text to say, "Now, although this may seem like it's ordinary, be aware that God is the one that has ordained these events." It's all perfectly ordinary.

The suggestion from shallow young men, well, surely we can certainly understand the sort of reasoning that goes on in the mind of a young man. He says, "Just bring all the prettiest women, young girls that you can find in the entire kingdom." It didn't need the hand of God to sovereignly intervene in order to put that thought in their minds. It's getting it out of their minds that would have taken a sovereign intervention of God.

There is Esther's beauty. Evidently she was a beautiful young woman but she was not alone. She was selected for that final group of young girls that were taken each night before the king. She found favor in the eyes of those who were preparing her. She shows a humility of spirit, not only in her submission to Mordechai who was like a father to her but it's submission or willing to take the counsel of those who are placed in positions of authority over her. Many a strong-willed individual might have said, "Well, then here's what I want to do," and just made the decision for themselves but Esther meekly goes to the person in charge and says, "Well, what would you recommend?"

And then there was the immediate attraction of the king to Esther. Evidently she was beautiful to look at but there was something more about her. I'm sure there were no ugly girls represented amongst those that were brought before him but it was Esther who stood out. It was Esther that won the affection of the king.

Now, as we ponder the events therefore of the second chapter of Esther, ask yourself this question: over which of these events did Esther have some control? Did she really have much choice in the matter? The only thing that we can say is, "Well, she didn't have to go to the eunuch and say, 'Well, what would you recommend that I should take?'" But aside from that, what is it that we're able to say that Esther really controlled? Did she manipulate events? Was she one of the scheming women that you might find in the Middle Eastern court that would manipulate her way into being put before the king? No, she seems to be the one that is really passive throughout and yet God is there behind the scenes at every turn.

And over which of these decisions was the heart of the king coerced? Did he find himself bullied into any of these decisions? Were these things beyond his control? Well, no he fell into line because it appealed to him. The normal thing would have been for him to have chosen one of the daughters of the 7 counselors. These were leading families of the kingdom. These were his inner cabinet and had shared the responsibility of government with him for many years. It would have been very natural for him to have taken one of their daughters used to the privileges of power, knowing how to conduct herself in public and so on.

Well, it's not shown us explicitly in the word of God but those who have an eye of faith as we look towards what is going to unfold, if you're familiar at all with the book of Esther, know that the writer is setting before us the story as it's unfolding. The story advances in the latter verses of this chapter. Mordechai is introduced to us to begin with simply as being the guardian of Esther but by the time the chapter finishes, we find him as one who has taken the initiative to protect the king from those who wish to kill him. One might have thought that Mordechai would have received some reward for saving the

king's life, that would be entirely reasonable, would it not? But we finish at the end of chapter 2 with the life of the king being saved and "it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king." And if your eye would happen to course down to the next verse, you would have read this, "After these things, King Ahasuerus promoted," not Mordechai, "Haman, the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him, and set his throne above all the officials who were with him." That we will deal in God's providence next Lord's day, God willing, with chapter 3.

What is it that we're showing? That God's work continues at God's pace and not according to our expectations. Let me sort of bring these thoughts together that when we talk about Joseph being raised up or we think about the disciples and the way which they understood the events through which they were passing, they were able to say, "You brought these people together, Herod and Pontius Pilate, but they only did what your sovereign will predestined for them to do. To do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." But was that obvious to Herod or to Pontius Pilate? Were they in their palaces thinking, "I'm being moved along by some strange force that's compelling me in a direction I don't really want to go in"? Well, anyone who is reading through their Gospels will know that that is far from being the case, that they became firm friends as a result of this. This is the direction that they wanted to go in. They had no understanding of what it was that God was doing and yet they were not coerced into doing this. But nevertheless, they only did whatever God's hand and plan predestined to take place.

Was it obvious to the disciples? Well, you might think that they had the advantage of 3 years of sitting at Jesus' feet and that therefore they would be privy to these things and they would say, "Oh yeah, I was expecting that. Yep, that's exactly what I thought was going to happen. That's what Jesus said." Well, Jesus told them plenty of times that he would have to go to Jerusalem, he would have to die but it still seems to have come as a shock. Where are the disciples at the foot of the cross? There is only one out of the 12 found there. It wasn't obvious beforehand and it wasn't obvious at the time. We have difficulty in seeing God's providence is working out. We really need to use the common expression, we need to be slapped upside the head in order for us to see the hand of God working in our lives.

Just think of the rich man and Lazarus. You know that story that Jesus tells: there is a rich man who has plenty of the fine things and there is Lazarus who is ill and lies at his gate and the dogs come and lick his sores. When they both die, the rich man goes to hell and the poor man goes to heaven. The rich man says, "Abraham, send Lazarus to tell my brothers lest they come where I am." I trust you are somewhat familiar with that story. I always find it strange that even in hell the rich man is barking out orders, "This is what you have to do." People in hell don't give orders.

What is the response? "Even if someone should rise from the dead, they will not believe." We are prone to thinking that if an army of 180,000 comes over the horizon that's just all that we need to accomplish God's will. It certainly was what the disciples would have thought. "Is it now that you're going to restore your kingdom?" What about the 180,000? That would do it? We have an idea in our own minds, "This is what God needs to do in

this particular situation but sometimes the army of 180,000 does not guarantee victory and the absence of an army does not mean defeat when God is at work.

King Artaxerxes has gone forth with his mighty army, the largest army then known in history and he failed and what we'll see in this story as it becomes more and more apparent is that God will work out his purposes and protect his people not with an army of 180,000 but with one young and beautiful girl. When Elijah ran from the court of Jezebel, God met with him. First there was wind and then there was a great earthquake but God wasn't in that either. Then there was a fire but God wasn't in the fire. Then there was a still small voice, the voice of God. Do we hear that still small voice or are we always looking for the miraculous in society, the strange and the bizarre, to be assured that this has to be surely God's hand? Or even when God is unannounced, invisible to the world and perhaps even invisible to us, still be assured that God has not left off for one moment. He has in his hands the hearts of kings and princes. He guides them as a man guides a watercourse, turns it wheresoever he wills.

The story is not finished for us. We're only at chapter 2 but where it is going because we have read on we know that those things were not known to Esther or to Mordechai. We don't know what tomorrow will have in store for us but we do know this: God so preserves me that without the will of my Father, not a hair can fall from my head, yeah, that all things must be subservient to my salvation. The story of Esther and Mordechai is far from being finished. There will be many a quickened pulse before it finishes but God is at work in the ordinary and he's still at work in the ordinary. And in those seeming coincidences, those events that you might pass by and not give a seconds thought to are within the sovereign plans and purposes of God for not a hair can fall from your head without the will of your Father in heaven.

Let's pray together.

*Our gracious God and our heavenly Father, we do thank thee for the story of Esther. We think thee that in thy providence the statements are not made so that we might recognize that thy sovereign purposes are undertaken sometimes without being unannounced. By faith, O God, we would see that which is not revealed either in word or to our view. We would, O God, bless thee in the ways in which thou hast ordered thy sovereign will, not only for Esther and for the safety of thy people 2 1/2 thousand years ago but recognizing that thou art the same yesterday and today and forever, that in those seemingly ordinary events, thou art treasuring up thy bright designs and working thou sovereign will. Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name, for his sake. Amen.*