

The Tale of Two Queens Esther 1:1 – 2:18

Well friends, the first scene in the story of Esther has all the right ingredients to be a fairy tale; there is a young Jewish lady, growing up in captivity in a foreign land, her parents have died and she is being raised by a kindly cousin...

But in spite of all the hardship she's endured in her young life, she has grown into a beautiful young woman of good character - it almost sounds like Cinderella.

And just like Cinderella goes from rags to riches, Esther also finds herself suddenly whisked away to the royal palace to take part in a beauty pageant, where she - along with hundreds of other young women - will be given the chance to try and impress the King and perhaps become his new queen...

But Esther's simple beauty and honest character seems to win over everyone she meets, and surprise of surprises she wins the King's heart as well and she becomes Queen, and Scene One of our fairytale comes to a close with a royal wedding.

Now royal weddings are almost as good as a fairytale – because a royal wedding is kind of like a fairytale come to life.

And Canadians have witnessed two such royal weddings in the past 40 years; 3 actually if you include Celine Dion's wedding.

There was Prince Charles and Lady Diana in 1981, and then Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2001.

And both weddings were spectacular affairs – with millions of people around the world watching to see what the brides were wearing, what sort of pageantry and ceremony would be involved, how Westminster Abbey would be decorated, what sort of carriage the bride and groom would ride in and so on...

And what made these royal weddings extra special is that both Diana and Kate were ordinary young women, living ordinary everyday lives and somehow their simple beauty and good character caught the attention of their Princes who married them and suddenly their lives were changed forever as they became royalty.

But what does one do when you become royalty? In a fairytale you live happily ever after... but what happens in real life?

Well, for Princess Diana – before her untimely death – it meant taking on a role as a public figure and working for public good and charitable causes across the globe – since being part of the Monarchy no longer carries the authority to govern and rule –as our nations have become Democracies.

And Princess Kate is dutifully following in her mother-in-law's footsteps in this regard. But what will Esther do as Queen?

Well we'll have to wait to see how this story turns out because the story of Esther not a Fairytale, but rather a tale of two Queens, Vashti and Esther - and to better understand what Esther will do, we need to look at what each represents.

Now to the average person, it might seem that Queen Vashti represents entitlement and arrogance and that Esther represents humility and a kind gentle spirit that wins hearts.

And since we find this story in the bible – we correctly assume that it is important – and we figure that there must be some sort of message or moral to the story and so it's not hard to say *“the moral of this story is to have good character like Esther and to not be defiant and rebellious like Vashti!”*

Well this may be good advice – but it's not really the way Vashti and Esther ought to be contrasted.

Rather we ought to notice that Vashti's appearance in this story is very brief – compared to how much the rest of the story focuses on Esther...

And we ought to notice that Esther is just a simple peasant with no political or noble connections; she's just a simple young woman - who has suddenly found herself becoming Queen of Persia.

By contrast Vashti is a political heavyweight. She was Persian nobility and had grown up around the palace court. She had her own political ambitions and desires, and her family was

prominent and influential in the Kingdom when she was Queen.

She could not allow herself to be made into spectacle by parading around at his feast and dancing for all the guests because it would undermine her ambitions and influence.

Now King Xerxes really needed the influence of Queen Vashti at this point in his reign, in his 3rd year as King, because he was raising an army to go and invade and conquer Greece.

In fact this is why he was hosting a banquet and displaying all his wealth and power to the nobles and officials and military leaders from across the Persian Empire, for a full six months.

This was a recruiting drive to gain the support he needs to assemble the largest army the ancient world had ever seen to attempt the second Persian invasion of Greece in 480 B.C.

So Vashti's refusal was a political maneuver to undermine Xerxes' military plans because she did not support them.

This is why Xerxes was furious – not all noble families liked the idea of sending their men and resources off to war for the King, but a strong King could still command their obedience – unless of course it was shown that he was not strong enough to command his own wife - so Vashti has to be deposed.

With this done Xerxes is able to raise his army and he goes off to invade and conquer Greece.

Now we know all about this second Persian invasion from our Ancient History classes, and from action movies like 300; and unfortunately for Xerxes, his massive army was held at bay at the pass of Thermopylae in Greece for two days by only 300 Spartan warriors, (lead by Gerard Butler 😊)

And if not for the brave resistance of these Spartan soldiers this massive army would have succeeded in defeating the Greeks, and if they had...

Well - the Persian Empire would have then stretched from India to Italy - and our history books would not contain the

story of how Western Democracy was developed and inspired from the political ideals of the ancient Greeks, and our society, our world today, would be very different.

So, Scene One in the story of Esther actually takes place at a very critical point in World history, there's a lot going on in between these four banquets, and the beauty pageant.

So, implications for the development of western civilization and democracy aside - I'm sure Vashti had her own reasons for not wanting to support Xerxes' war against Greece but the story of Esther doesn't mention them.

In fact it's kind of amazing that this story doesn't mention anything at all about this war, or the fact that Xerxes failed, that he lost the entire Persian navy, and had spent most of the royal treasury on this effort! It simply skips it all together and moves on.

And the events in Chapter 2, where Xerxes remembers Vashti and that he had banished her, occur at least two to three years after the events in Chapter 1.

We get the feeling that Xerxes may be regretting banishing Vashti - maybe he would like to have her political support again, maybe he's thinking she was right about the war, maybe he's just missing his Queen – who knows?

But whatever the issue is, it appears that stocking up his harem with beautiful women from across his empire and choosing a new Queen from among them solves the problem.

And this is how Esther becomes Queen – so we're back to the question we asked.

Now that Esther has gone through this fairy-tale rags-to-riches experience and become Queen – what will she do? What will her role be - a beautiful trophy wife, eye candy for the general public, the woman who will provide an heir to the throne?

We don't know – and I don't think Esther really knew either. Aside from the thrill and honor of being chosen as Queen we aren't told that she came in with any ambitions or political interests to pursue.

She was probably wondering why this was all happening, and just trying to keep up with what was expected of her – which was not easy to do.

Because while Vashti had come from one of the noble families of Persia - Esther was descended from the family of God – we learn from the story that she was a Jew, and it was a struggle to remember her identity as one of God's chosen people because they were living in exile, away from the land of Israel.

Those whom she lived among didn't know the one true God, Yahweh – they didn't have a covenant with Him, they didn't know his laws, they didn't celebrate the same feasts and holidays to remember special events – like Passover, the Day of Atonement, and she couldn't make a yearly trip to

Jerusalem and see the temple – the place where God himself dwelt – it has been destroyed when they were exiled.

How were they supposed to be God's people in a strange land – and what should they do when that strange land actually started to become familiar and comfortable – and the stories of their history and people and the Promised Land started to sound strange and unfamiliar? It wasn't easy.

Now Esther was Queen over these strangers, these fellow citizens of the Persian empire – she had to play the role and do what was expected of her and not reveal that she was one of God's chosen ones for fear that it would put her in danger.

Because friends - when you belong to the one true God - you stick out, and you go against the grain – and not everyone appreciates that – in fact some hate it and they hate you for it, and they will hurt you for it – but that's getting a bit ahead of ourselves for now...

And so this story begins with the tale of two Queens – Vashti and Esther, one is a Queen who knew her role, what she wanted and how to go about achieving it; the other is a Queen who is trying to figure out what has happened and what is expected of her, and how she will keep her secret and how she can reconcile her two identities.

Will Esther be successful? Well if you want to find out – pick up a bible and read ahead- and be sure to come back next week when we explore Scene 2.

But brothers and sisters this is more than an interesting and entertaining story – this is scripture...

So what does this reveal to us about God – when it doesn't mention God? And how does this look forward to, and lead us to, Jesus Christ? And in what way does it encourage us to live in obedience to Him?

Well friends; this is one of those stories in the scripture that says a lot, by not saying much...

For a story that takes place in the epicenter of the most powerful Empire on earth, there is a conspicuous lack of reference to any of the extremely significant historical events that were going on at the time.

You would think, at the very least, there would be some mention of King Xerxes going off to war against Greece... but there is nothing!

The only events that the author of Esther considers important enough to mention in these first two of chapters of Esther are those which set-up the circumstances through which Esther is chosen as Queen.

Now we will learn more about why this is considered so important in the coming weeks...

But this teaches us something about what the scripture, and therefore God, considers as the truly significant and important events in the history of our world.

A particular historical event may be very significant to us – the Greeks successfully defending themselves against the Persian invasion, and thus being able to continue to develop and eventually spread the political ideals of democracy.

But in the Bible’s perspective - and therefore God’s perspective – there is something else more important that is going on... and what we might consider historically to be the main focus is actually just peripheral activity – just details in the set design if you will...

So friends what the scripture – and therefore God is – teaching us here is that the events which seem to be so significant in shaping our times, directing the course of our nation, and determining the future of the world; like the Trump Presidency, North Korea’s Nuclear capacity, Climate Change, and so on...

In God’s perspective these things are not are not significant players that we think they are.

Because you see friends, the story of Esther is scripture –but it is also a part of scripture – it is but one chapter in a much larger book, the Bible.

And if I can quickly summarize the overarching story of the Bible, it is that God has a plan to do something about the evil which plagues this world, He has a plan to save the people in this world and then He will make it new again.

So what the Bible reveals are the truly significant historical events are the ones which help to implement God’s plan and make it into a reality in this world.

So what is truly significant, are the historical events that move this world along the path of Creation, the Fall into Sin, Redemption and the coming New Creation, and more familiar we become with these parts of the story of the bible the easier it is to recognize what truly is significant.

So in the story of Esther, we join the grand story of the bible as it describes how God's plan of Redemption specifically involved the Jews.

So while we might consider the Persian Empire as being the greatest threat to the development of ancient Greek democracy – the scripture sees Persia as being the greatest threat to the role the Jews would play in God's plan.

In fact we may be wondering what the Jews are doing in Persia? Why are they not in the Promised Land that God had given them?

Well you may remember hearing in the drama that Esther cousin Mordecai, was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, a descendant of Kish, and was who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. (2:6)

So friends – let me tell you that there are times where things that we do not consider to be very significant, actually are.

You see the Kings of Israel & Judah often fell into the trap of thinking that God's laws weren't very significant and they allowed the nation to fall away from God and worship the gods of the surrounding nations and live as those nations lived.

So eventually, after warning them many times – God allowed the surrounding nations whom they loved to emulate – to defeat them and carry them off into exile.

And so that is why the Jews are in Persia, and it's why we don't hear God specifically mentioned in the story of Esther – because this is a low point in the relationship between God and His chosen people.

But friends – here's the thing about being Chosen by God, it stamps itself on your identity in a way that can't be erased, even when your relationship with Him is at a low point. God does not give up on those whom He has chosen.

So – even when Esther is chosen by the King and made Queen of Persia – it can't erase her identity as one of God's chosen people... even when they are in exile – God still has plans for them.

So Esther will still struggle with these two identities – and we might wonder if can she reconcile them, but as the story progresses we will see that her identity as one of God's chosen people actually gives purpose to her identity as the Queen of Persia.

Now how does this apply to us friends?

Well – by skipping ahead a few chapters in the grand story of the Bible – we find ourselves in 2017 after the significant historical event of Jesus's life and ministry, his death and resurrection and ascension into heaven...

And as we learned last month – Jesus is extremely significant because through Him, we Gentiles are now included in God's chosen people – we are chosen to, in Jesus.

And friends – when God chooses you in Jesus, the Holy Spirit stamps that identity on you – and it cannot be erased, even when we live in a society and culture that wants to choose us, or rather wants us to choose for ourselves who we are and what our identity will be...

And so friends – many of us have two identities don't we... and we struggle with them.

We might experience it as the person we are at church, and the person we are at work... or it might be what we believe on the inside vs. how we act on the outside... or it could be what a particular role may require of us - conflicting with who we actually are... two identities.

But the good news is that just like Esther – the struggles we have with our identities will resolve in Jesus – He will give purpose to, reshape, and reform whatever other identity may be conflicting with who we are in Him.

Because that is who Jesus was in His very person – His divine identity gave new purpose and reshaped His human identity – so that our sinful human nature can be reformed to love and serve God.

And that is what the Holy Spirit is doing to us – believe in it, trust in it – and most of all... co-operate with it! 😊

Because when we do brothers and sisters; God uses us to accomplish things in this world that are extremely significant.

And not necessarily because they compete with global politics, or solve global problems, or bring about social change... though sometimes they might – God willing.

You see as the Holy Spirit reforms us – we begin to reform things around us – and as we learned the really significant things in this world are the things that help to move God's plan towards its completion.

And when business is reformed by a Christian businessman... when music is reformed by a Christian musician... when politics is reformed by a Christian politician... when science is reformed by a Christian scientist - this is significant... because it helps to move things ahead to the fulfillment of God's plan at the end of the story - when Jesus returns and brings in the New Heavens and the new Earth.

So brothers and sisters – Esther is significant, not because she has become the Queen of Persia – but because her identity as part of God's people means that this will be used as part of God's plan...

And you, brothers and sisters, are significant – not because of your titles, or salary, or your position or your connections... but because your identity as belonging to God in Jesus Christ means that God will use whoever you are to help bring about the New Heavens and the new Earth.

Believe it, trust it, and co-operate with it. Amen