



# Central Peninsula Church

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Esther 1:1-2:18  
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## What a Difference a Day Makes

SERIES: *For Such a Time as This: Study of the Book of Esther*

It was January 24, 1848. James Marshall woke up like he did every other day. Nothing special. Just another day. Hard work. Hot sun. No divine writing in the sky. No angelic choirs. He was heading up a crew that was building a saw mill on the American River. But somehow that morning, as he stared into the crystal clear waters, something caught his eye; something that sparkled. He took a closer look, reached down to see if he could grab hold of it, and before long he held a few tiny gold nuggets of the highest quality in his hand. That day was the beginning of the largest and most feverish migration in the history of America - the California Gold Rush. Hundreds of thousands of people sprinted to California because of what happened on that ordinary day.

One day can make all the difference in the world. An ordinary day can become extraordinary. Think biblically for a moment. Moses wakes up like any other day. No big deal. But on that day he would see a burning bush and a voice would come out from the bush, and his life would never be the same. Or how about that day when a Jewish teenager named David was tending his father's sheep like so many other days. On that day he heard his father call him inside. Before the sun would set, David would discover that one day he would be the new King of Israel! Or fast forward about a thousand years. A young fisherman wakes up on his boat, checks his nets, and is about to roll back to sleep when he hears a voice from the shore, "Follow me! I'll make you fish for men!" One ordinary day became extraordinary for Simon, soon called Peter.

And what about the day that has yet to come? Scripture says on THAT day, people will be going about their business like any other day. Children will be headed off to school, loaded down with school books and jelly sandwiches. Men and women will fight the morning rush hour. Businesses will open. Planes will take off. But on that day, in the twinkling of an eye, a trumpet will blast, Christ will split open the sky, and God's plan for human history will be consummated. It could be tomorrow. It could be today! But whenever it is, it will just start as another ordinary, ho-hum, no big deal kind of day.

F.B. Meyer said it so well: "Fit yourself for God's service. He will presently appoint you. In some unlikely quarter, in a shepherd's hut, or in an artisan's cottage, God has his prepared and appointed instrument. As yet the shaft is hidden in the quiver, in the shadow of his hand; but at the precise moment at which it will have the greatest effect, it will be produced and launched on the air."

This is exactly what would happen to a young Jewish girl living in a foreign land 450 years before Christ.

Her name was Esther and we'll be looking at her story over the next few weeks. The most amazing thing about the book of Esther is that God's name is never even mentioned, yet God's presence broods all over this story. Esther had absolutely no idea when she woke up one morning that she would soon be intimately connected to the most powerful man on earth, the king of Persia. Yet God would weave these two lives together to fulfill his good purpose. Esther's "launch day" would come in the "days of Ahasuerus."

### I. The king throws a party (1:1-9)

**"Now it took place in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, in those days as King Ahasuerus sat on his throne which was in Susa the capital, in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his princes and attendants, the army officers of Persia and Media, the nobles, and the princes of his provinces being in his presence, when he displayed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor of his great majesty for many days, 180 days."**

In many ways this would seem to be business as usual in the Persian empire. King Ahasuerus (in Greek his name is Xerxes), who history tells us reigned from 486-465 BC, is described in all his splendor. He rules from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces. His empire was actually divided up into 31 satrapies, but the writer is trying to impress us, so he mentions the greater number of smaller units called provinces. The king is at his winter palace in Susa. It's the third year of his reign. History also tells us that during this time he was preparing for his next war campaign against the Greeks. It was probably with this agenda in mind that he throws a party. He wants to display his wealth and power to those who would support his war efforts. He wants them to see that he's the right guy to line up with; here are the kind of things they could expect to receive if they support his efforts.

This was quite a party! Did you notice how long it lasted? 180 days! We're talking six full months of banqueting! That would make one of today's celebrity blowouts look like a church potluck! No doubt there was loud music, dancing, and the best entertainment. The invitation list was exclusive - military and civil VIP's. The paparazzi were all over this place. But it didn't end there. Look at v. 5,

**"And when these days were completed, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Susa the capital, from the greatest to the least, in the court of the garden of the king's palace."**

For seven days he opened it up so everyone and anyone could

come. The place was decorated to the hilt. Imagine being a blue collar worker in the city and being invited to the king's palace for a party! I mean, life was hard for most people back then. But here they get to come and hang out at the palace and eat and drink all they want. And there was plenty of drinking. The writer makes that very clear in vv. 8-9. People could drink to their heart's desire. You could order a double martini or a 50-year-old Cabernet.

## II. The Queen is a party-pooper (1:9-22)

Meanwhile Queen Vashti was giving her own separate banquet for all the women in the palace. **"Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the palace which belonged to King Ahasuerus"** (v. 9). No doubt there were a lot of them. The king had a harem and concubines. So Vashti got all the ladies together for their own bash.

Meanwhile the king was getting drunk. Look at the start of v. 10, **"On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine...."**. It was customary in those days for heads of state to make decisions about war when they were drunk and then approve them the next day when they were sober. Or sometimes they would make a decision when they were sober and approve it the next day when they were drunk! They believed getting drunk put them in closer touch with the gods. But the king is not just thinking about war.

In his drunkenness he decides he wants to show off another of his royal prizes - Queen Vashti, **"...he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the princes, for she was beautiful"** (v.10b,11). Scholars have wrestled with the meaning of the king's command. Some suggest that he just wanted Vashti to come unveiled, which would have been scandal enough in the Persian court. Others suggest that he wanted her to come wearing ONLY her crown, which would have been another kind of scandal. Whatever it meant, the Queen wasn't buying it. **"But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry and his wrath burned within him"** (v. 12).

Now here is quite a situation. We've got the most powerful man on earth trying to show off all his wealth and power, and he can't even get his wife to come to his party! It's interesting what preachers do with this text. Some preachers use Vashti as a negative example of a rebellious wife. I mean, wives should submit to their husbands, right? Others use Vashti as a positive example of a wife who stood up to her husband when he demanded what was wrong. This took courage - you don't defy the king and get away with it. Who knows, perhaps she was drunk too! I actually think Vashti did the right thing here, but that's not the point the writer is trying to make. The writer says nothing about the rightness or wrongness of her actions. He doesn't even condemn the king for being

drunk, though it's wrong. What he REALLY wants us to know is that God is working in all of this. God is working even where he seems least likely to be. He's setting the stage.

You see, in the next scene the King asks his advisors what do about this situation. "What's our game plan, guys? How are we going to handle this? I mean, this wasn't part of the schedule." So one of his advisors, a guy named Memucan, raises his hand and says in v. 16, "Hey king, this is not cool. If people in your kingdom hear that Vashti has defied you and gotten away with it, then all the wives will think they can defy their husbands. We can't let that happen. We have to send a message. We have to dethrone Vashti and get someone else in here who will submit to your authority."

That's what you call a classic case of overreaction! Makes you wonder if this guy Memucan was having some trouble with his own wife! He thinks, "Oh boy, if my wife hears about this!" But all the guys hear this and they think, "Yeah, that's right, man. My wife hears about this and I'll never hear the end of it. She's already pushing for more freedom. She gets a hold of this and I'll be taking orders from her!" So a decision is made. Look at vv. 21-22.

**"And this word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, that every man should be the master in his own house and the one who speaks in the language of his own people."**

What's ironic about this is that by taking Memucan's advice, the king ends up publicizing the whole embarrassing incident across the empire - he couldn't pull off the very thing he commanded, that every man should be ruler over his own house, and now everyone knew it.

You might be wondering at this point what all this has to do with Esther. But look at the last few words of v. 19, **"...and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she."** In other words, exit Vashti, enter Esther.

Keep something in mind: Esther hasn't the foggiest idea that any of this is going on. She knows nothing about these events that will eventually change the course of her life. She's just going about her no big deal, ho-hum days, but get ready, she's about to be launched!

This is the wonder and glory of God's providence. He's working behind the scenes; moving people, rearranging events, changing minds, all to work out his plan for his chosen people while they sit in exile. He's working out his plan even in a pagan palace. He's working out his plan even through the drunkenness of Ahasuerus and the rebellion of Vashti. Proverbs 21:1 says, **"The King's heart is like channels of water in the hands of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wishes."** Here's powerful Ahasuerus, proclaiming his royal power for six solid months. Yet he is just a little tributary in the hands of Almighty God! God would use these events to eventually launch Esther into her destined role, though Esther has no idea how God is setting the stage for her entrance.

This is an encouragement to you. People in high places don't control your destiny, God does. It doesn't look that way, but it's true. God is working behind the scenes of

your ordinary days; days where it would seem that the odds are stacked against you; days where it would seem that God is nowhere to be found; days where his name doesn't make the headlines; or like the book of Esther, days where his name doesn't even get printed in the pages of your life.

But how would it happen for Esther? How would Esther finally come center stage?

### III. A new Queen is selected (2:1-20)

The writer begins chapter 2 with these words,

**“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.”**

We don't know how much time has passed but it's clear the king is not a happy camper. He remembers Vashti. He can't get the whole thing out of his mind. He has some regrets. He's lonely. He's moping around the palace. His attendants are watching all of this and they're worried about him. And so they come up with a plan.

Starting in v. 2 they say, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. Let's round them all up and have a Miss Persia contest. We'll bring them into the palace and get them looking great and then serve them up to the king. The one he likes the best will be the new Queen.” Now this guy already had all the beautiful women he could handle! He could snap his fingers and have a different woman every night. It wasn't sex he needed, it was a wife; a partner and companion through life.

Now the stage is set for Esther. What started for her as a very ordinary day would become extraordinary. Look at vv. 5-6,

**“Now there was a Jew in Susa the capital whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, 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.”**

Mordecai is an ordinary Jew living in exile. He is also raising a young girl named Hadasah.

**“And he was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor 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” (v. 7).**

Hadasah, her Jewish name, means “myrtle.” To the Jews, myrtle represented God's forgiveness and acceptance of his people. Having been exiled by God because of their sin, that's exactly what they needed. The Persian equivalent, Esther, means star, because the flowers of the myrtle were star-shaped. We're told two things about Esther here: she was an orphan and she was beautiful. The Hebrew says, “she was beautiful in form and lovely to look at.” You get the picture!

It's no wonder that Esther is one of the women chosen and brought into the King's palace. Look at vv. 8-9,

**“So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to Susa the capital 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. 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.”**

On the surface, this may sound to us like Esther's lucky day. But notice it says she “was taken.” Esther didn't sign up for the beauty contest, she “was taken.” She's caught up in events beyond her control. Think of it from her perspective. Here is a beautiful young Jewish woman who has already lost her parents, being taken from her home placed in the custody of a total stranger who probably looked just like Bob Barker, and prepared for “one big night” with a depressed, overweight pagan king in hope that he might choose her as a replacement for Vashti. Sounds like fun, huh?

Josephus, the Jewish historian, tells us that as many as 400 women were involved in this competition. I mean, this is the Rose Parade, Miss America, and Miss Universe all rolled into one! Think of the atmosphere in the palace. Think of the competitive spirit, the backbiting, the envy, the checking each other out. Later we read they would have a whole year to enhance their beauty and polish their seductive powers. Look at v. 12, **“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**

This is like a whole year at the finest spa in the Napa valley! That's a lot of Oil of Olay! All this to get ready for one big night with the king.

**“...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. 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” (vv.13,14).**

The whole thing had to be repugnant to Esther. She would give up her virginity to a pagan king, who she had not married, and who might very well have her for one single night and leave her in his harem for the rest of her life, never to even see him again. How could you possibly see God at work in that situation? How could you possibly keep your spiritual equilibrium in that atmosphere? But every indication is that she did. There are three indications in the story that tell me that Esther was more than just a pretty face; she was a woman of character.

First, she showed unusual restraint and self-control. Look back up at v. 10, **“Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make them known.”** She didn't tell anyone she was Jewish. She could have just blurted it out, but she kept her mouth shut. This wasn't a time to witness. It wasn't even a time to stand up for her faith. It was a time to conceal. Verbal restraint is fast becoming a forgotten virtue, but a virtue it is. We should learn to

hold our tongue, to keep a secret.

This leads to the second thing about her - she kept the secret because she had a teachable spirit. She didn't tell because Mordecai told her not to. She might have not even understood why, but she knew how to listen to the older, wiser people in her life. Proverbs says, "**Plans go wrong for lack of advice, many counselors bring success**" (15:22).

Finally, she was modest. Look at v. 15, "**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.**"

When it was her turn to go in to the king, Esther didn't succumb to the superficiality and self-indulgence of the situation. She listened to Hegai. I think he knew that Esther was not just a raw beauty, but she was beautiful on the inside too. If she just stayed herself the king would see that there was something special about this girl.

And indeed he did. When it came time for her night with the king, he was overwhelmed.

**"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. And 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. 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."**

One ordinary day. Esther is pulled out of the dark quiver of exile and launched into a key role in the history of God's people. What can we learn from this about our own lives?

#### IV. Application

A. *First of all, God's plans are not frustrated by human kings. Don't be impressed by them. Were you impressed by the king's wealth and power? A six month banquet! The interesting thing about that is the Jewish people reading about it years later would be laughing. You see, they knew something about Ahasuerus. They knew that he would return from Greece four years later disgraced and defeated. His royal wealth on display here would be depleted. This is like us seeing a film clip of the old May Day celebrations held in Red Square. The Soviets proudly parade their military might through Red Square. We look at that now and laugh, because after a century of state sponsored atheism, the mighty communist state has been turned on its head, while the church of Jesus Christ, which they tried to extinguish, continues to thrive! That's*

what the Jews were thinking years later as they read this story about this not so invincible king.

God can accomplish his purpose through an evil despot just as easily as through a Christian president. God's hands are never tied by the character of the person in office. So we shouldn't be overly bummed out when we don't like the results of an election, and we shouldn't be overly optimistic when we do. God will work out his plan either way.

B. *Second, God's purposes are not hindered when the events of this world are carnal and secular. His plan is not hindered in the godless halls of ancient Persia. He is not limited to working in the Christian family, or the church with the right doctrine, or the country with the right leader. His plan is not hindered by drunkenness, or adultery, or compromise. He can work in a pastor's study or the corner office of a Silicon Valley CEO. When we fail to recognize this, when we put God in a box and limit his sphere of influence and control, we become fearful and closed in ourselves, and we fail to be salt and light in the world.*

C. *Third, God's people are not excluded from places of impact because of hardship or handicap. Esther had so much going against her. She was a foreigner. She was a woman. She was an orphan. Yet none of this stopped God from exalting her to the highest place of influence.*

What kind of odds are stacked against you? What kind of hardship or handicap have you been handed? Maybe you weren't born into a Christian home and you missed out on some early training. Maybe you didn't get the education you now wish you had. Maybe you didn't marry the person you thought you would. Maybe your health keeps you from enjoying the opportunities others have. Do you think God is limited by that? Not for one minute. He who lifted up Esther can lift you too.

D. *Fourth, God's program is not stalled when time rolls on and nothing seems to change. There is something I hope you didn't miss here. It says in v. 16 that Esther became Queen in the seventh year of his reign. Remember back in 1:3 that he threw his big party in the third year. That means four years had passed since our story started. God is at work this whole time, but notice he doesn't seem to be in a hurry. We tend to think if God is really engaged, he will do something NOW, or at least SOON. Certainly by sun down. But God is no respecter of the human clock. George Herbert said it best, "God's mill grinds slow, but sure." Are you still waiting? Are you wondering if God's slowness means his absence? The story of Esther teaches us to hold on and wait.*

James Hastings says this about the story of Esther: "The book of Esther does not say much about God, but his presence broods over it all, and it's the real spring that moves the movers that are seen."

You may feel as if your life is so ordinary; it doesn't say much about God, but his presence broods all over it, and he is the real spring that moves the movers that are seen. Wherever you are at, whatever you are doing, you can trust him today. The old hymn says it best:

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, But trust him for his grace,  
Behind a frowning providence, He hides a smiling face."

*William Cowper*