

ESTHER

For Such A Time As This

by

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CHAPTER ONE

IN A PERSIAN PALACE

“NOW IT CAME TO PASS in the days of Ahasuerus, (this is Ahasuerus which reigned, from India even unto Ethiopia, over an hundred and seven and twenty provinces)” and generally held to be Xerxes I who reigned in Persia from 485 B.C. until 465 B.C. He should not be confused with the Ahasuerus mentioned in Ezra 4:6 who reigned a good deal earlier than this, nor with the Ahasuerus mentioned in Daniel 9:1 who was the father of Darius, the contemporary of Daniel. It has been suggested that *Ahasuerus* was really more of a title than a personal name. The fact that Ahasuerus is particularly described here as the one who reigned over one hundred and twenty-seven provinces seems to indicate that the writer was aware of others who bore the same name or title. This one is distinguished because of the wide extent of his empire which was great enough to include the Babylonian as one of its provinces.

Xerxes I succeeded his father Darius and was able to regain Egypt, something which his father had been unable to accomplish. But he failed to conquer Greece, even though he exhausted his empire in the attempt to do so. He was assassinated in 465 B.C., and his son Artaxerxes I succeeded him.

From verse 2 of our chapter we learn that he had his palace in *Shushan* which is indicated as *Susa* on most Bible maps and located 150 miles north of the head of the Persian Gulf. I take it that when it says **“when the king Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom”** that that means that he ascended the throne. We have a similar statement in I Chronicles 29:23 concerning King Solomon. **“In the third year of his reign,”** that is, in 483 B.C., **“he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him.”** We are not told exactly how many guests there were. But the number would certainly run into hundreds. And it is quite possible that the list of guests changed from time to time because the feast lasted about six months. Inasmuch as this great gathering took place just previous to Persia’s third expedition against Greece (480-479 B.C.), it has been concluded that the real purpose of this gathering was to prepare for that. That seems to be confirmed by the statement that **“the power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces”** were there. No doubt they came in relays because all could not be absent from their official posts at the same time.

“When he shewed the riches of his glorious kingdom, and the honor of his excellent majesty many days, even an hundred and fourscore days”; according to Herodotus it was then that he announced unto them his ambition:

“As Cyrus, Cambyses, and Darius, have enlarged the empire, I wish to do the same. I propose to bridge the Hellespont, march through Europe, and fire Athens for burning Sardis and opposing Dads and Artaphernes. By reducing Attica and Greece, the sky will be the only boundary of Persia.”

The display of all his riches and glory may have been made at this time both to impress them and to inspire them. Others have tried the same since then only to find by sad experience, as he had to learn, that **“pride goeth before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall”** (Proverbs 16:18).

“And when these days were expired, the king made a feast unto all the people that were present in Shushan the palace, both unto great and small, seven days, in the court of the garden of the king’s palace.” This second feast lasted only a week and seems to have been made especially for the people living in the palace. The palace itself was distinct from the city. (See Esther 9:12, 13). Just how many people lived in the palace we are not told, only that they were **“great and small.”** It would seem from verse 9 of our chapter that only men were present, however.

The description given of the court of the garden in verse 6 shows what a grand place it must have been with its awnings of various colors, **“fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rings and pillars of marble.”** After the manner of the Orient, the guests would recline at the table as they did when our blessed Lord was here on earth. And the beds, or couches, on which they reclined were of gold and silver. This may mean that the coverings were made of cloth of gold and silver, or it may mean that the very beds themselves were actually made of the precious metals. But where we might expect to find expensive Persian rugs there was **“a pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black, and marble.”** According to one commentator, these last two were really “alabaster and black marble,” or “mother of pearl.”

Evidently the main feature of this feast was the drinking of royal wine of which there was an abundance, **“according to the state of the king.”** The cups from which the guests drank were all of gold, but no two alike. The only thing which relieves this sad picture is the statement that the drinking was without constraint, **“none did compel.”** The reason here given for this royal commandment is **“that they should do according to every man’s pleasure.”** What that “pleasure” meant we may learn from what follows.

The ninth verse of the chapter lets us know what was going on elsewhere in the palace. Here we learn of another feast given by the queen **“for the women in the royal house which belonged to king Ahasuerus.”** It has been suggested that *Vashti* was not the actual name of the queen but an epithet something like “sweetheart” or “darling.” If that be so, it would indicate that she was really a great favorite of the king. Nevertheless, she had a mind of her own and for that we must admire her.

“On the seventh day,” just as the feast to all the people was drawing to a close, **“when the heart of the king was merry with wine . . . he commanded the seven chamberlains that served”** in his presence to bring the queen before him **“with the crown royal to shew the people and the princes her beauty: for she was fair to look upon.”**

Inasmuch as it was the custom then for women to be heavily veiled, it would be necessary for her to appear unveiled in order for the king to show her beauty to the men assembled there at that time. This evidently was too much for her. To break with that tradition, however trivial it may seem to us now was too serious a matter to her. Moreover, she probably knew that the king was not the only one whose heart was merry with wine by that time. To have appeared in such company unveiled would have exposed her to possible insult and disgrace. And so she **“refused to come at the king’s commandment by his chamberlains”** or eunuchs.

And now the one who shortly before was merry with wine is **“very wroth, and his anger burned in him.”** How quick is the change from the one extreme to the other when a man has lost all sense of the consideration which is due one who occupies the position of queen of the realm!

Nevertheless, he seems to have had sense enough to consult with his **“wise men”** before taking any action against the queen. We note that these wise men were men **“which knew the times.”** They also **“knew law and judgment.”** Because of this they enjoyed a place of special nearness to the king, they **“saw the king’s face,”** and they also **“sat the first in the kingdom.”** Officially, they were **“the seven princes of Persia and Media.”** In our country I suppose that we would call them members of the Cabinet. In Great Britain they would be known as the Privy Council.

The fact that these men **“knew the times”** may mean that they knew the trend of things. It is possible that Vashti’s refusal to obey the command of Ahasuerus was a symptom more than anything else. It is interesting to observe that the king raised the question: **“What shall we do unto the queen Vashti according to the law, because she hath not performed the commandment of king Ahasuerus by the chamberlains?”**

Since they were men who had knowledge of the times as well as of the law, it looks as though they saw in her refusal that which was going to have far-reaching effects. That this is so seems to be clear from the statement made by Memucan when he said before the king and the princes, **“Vashti the queen hath not done wrong to the king only, but also to all the princes, and to all the people that are in all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus.”** But, it should be noted, that there is not even a hint here that she had broken any law which was in force at that time.

There are those who have seen in this a parallel to what Eve did in the Garden of Eden in that her sin also had far-reaching effects. But tempting as it may be for some to indulge in such typological speculation, we must be careful not to read into this simple story what is not there. It seems that these men were afraid that when the news got around that **“the king Ahasuerus commanded Vashti the queen to be brought in before him, but she came not,”** that all the women in the realm would despise their husbands. From verse 18 we learn that they especially feared what might happen in the court itself among **“the ladies of Persia and Media.”**

It does seem singular that Vashti's refusal should have such far-reaching effects. It all makes us suspect that some sort of social upheaval was in the making. And that is why it was suggested that Vashti's behavior at this time was a symptom rather than a cause.

The fact that the wise men feared that there would arise **“too much contempt and wrath”** does look as though there was contempt and wrath already—contempt on the part of the women, and wrath on the part of the men. Thus, in a rather incidental way we get a hint of some of the stresses and strains which there may have been in the social order of that day. And so **“the wise men which knew the times”** hastened to take steps to prevent, if possible, an upheaval which would have humbled every male in the Persian Empire.

Accordingly we read that they proposed to the king that a royal commandment should go out from him, and that it should become a part of the unalterable laws of the Persians and the Medes, **“That Vashti come no more before king Ahasuerus.”** This was probably tantamount to imprisonment for life. Even though these wise men had the reputation of knowing **“law and judgment,”** they did not act according to either on this occasion.

All of which shows that even those who have the reputation for wisdom do not always live up to that reputation. Then, too, we may see in this incident evidence that the government of Persia was not the same as the absolute rule which had obtained in the days of the Babylonians, inasmuch as this was proposed, not by the king, but by his advisers.

In their advice to the king these **“wise men”** really gave him more than he had asked for. They not only suggested what should be done to Vashti but they also wanted him to **“give her royal estate unto another that is better than she.”** And the purpose of all this is clearly indicated in verse 20. **“When the king's decree which he shall make shall be published throughout all his empire, (for it is great,) all the wives shall give to their husbands honor, both to great and small.”** While it is true that the official position of Vashti made her offense more serious than if she had been an ordinary housewife, it does look as though there was also the grave possibility that her action would touch off a revolt among the women of that day.

“And the saying pleased the king and the princes; and the king did according to the word of Memucan.” Apparently it was just what he wanted to hear or, shall we say, what they wanted to hear because the princes are here again associated with him. And **“he sent letters into all the king's provinces, into every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language, that every man should bear rule in his own house, and that it should be published according to the language of every people.”** Just how much work this involved we cannot say exactly. But when we take into account that there were 127 provinces in the empire, we may get some idea of the magnitude of this task. No doubt the decree had to be translated into a number of different languages. It had to be according to the writing, or script, of each province.

The last part of this royal decree has been interpreted to mean “that every man should speak his own language in his family, and not that of his wife, if that were different. This is the plain meaning of the existing text” (Pulpit Commentary).

There is one thing which we must not overlook in our study of this matter and that is the fact that in all of this Vashti was never called on to defend herself. Nor does anyone rise up to defend her. Her case is disposed of without the right of being heard in the presence of her accusers. We who have lived in a democracy all of our lives can hardly conceive of such a thing. And yet, I dare say, that there is many a woman living in our country today who has been dealt with in very much the same way. Like Vashti she has had to suffer in silence even though she might have won a legal battle if she had taken the matter to court. Surely, we may learn a very practical lesson from this. And we may apply it to all who may be suffering in like manner today. With true queenly grace Vashti did not allow herself to be drawn into this sad affair which had been magnified out of all proportion by those who seem to have been determined to get rid of her.

Whether or not there was any remorse on the part of Ahasuerus later, we do not know. The opening verse of the next chapter might indicate that. But more than that we cannot say. We do know that **“he remembered Vashti”** but now the task before his servants is to find one **“better than she.”** Who that may be we are not told as yet. “Man proposes, but God disposes.” And even though He is not mentioned in this book, it is not hard to see that He is standing in the shadow “keeping watch above His own.”

As for Vashti it is possible that she learned, as another had learned long before her time, that **“better is a dry morsel, and quietness therewith, than an house full of sacrifices with strife”** (Proverbs 17:1).

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