



## ***LIFE LESSONS FROM THE LADIES: Part 2***

### **ESTHER: LESSON 2**

I'm a puzzle girl. I love jigsaws. I love how you can mentally sort of "check out" while doing them; I love the strategic way you study the pieces to make them fit; I love the finished product and the feeling of accomplishment. I also love how they nicely illustrate the Romans 8:28 principle; "All things work together for good to those who love God and are called according to His purpose." Our life is like a puzzle, with each circumstance and season being a crucial part. Sometimes things happen in our lives and they just don't make sense, but, like a puzzle, when all the pieces are put together, they make something beautiful. When we look at individual pieces of the puzzle, we can't tell what the finished product will be, unless, of course, we have the cover. But we trust that each piece plays its part in creating the desired picture. This morning as I was driving to work, the DJ on the radio made a random comment about how amazing it is that we can trust the maker of a jigsaw puzzle to put all the pieces in the box, yet we fail to trust God with the pieces of our life.

As I studied Esther this week, I kept thinking about God's providence and how it's like the puzzle. Esther's life was pieced together by the Master, just like ours. She had no idea what would happen, yet she could trust that God was working behind the scenes. It's funny, but there are some actual puzzle pieces I like ... the ones with straight edges, the ones with bright colors, the ones that are more obvious to put in place. But there are others I dislike, such as the sky, grass, or real small ones that I can't figure out. As I thought about my life, there are "pieces" I dislike; pieces that make no sense; that don't seem to fit; that I have a hard time understanding, and bottom line, are just too painful. But I was reminded by the story of Esther (and the radio DJ), that all the pieces matter to God. Some I like, some I don't, but it will all fit together, in His time. It's the puzzle of my life, my story. And God is working behind the scenes just like He was doing for Esther, and Mordecai, and the Jews. They had some pretty ugly pieces during the story, yet God was still in control. What about you? Are you experiencing a

“piece” that you just don’t like, or just doesn’t seem to fit? Hang in there. Remember that although God may seem to be hidden, He is not hiding! He is over all. Can you trust Him?

### **First Day**

1. Read Esther 1:1-22. Any repeated words, phrases, or thoughts? What’s the main point of each of the following sections?
  - a. Verses 1-8
  - b. Verses 9-12
  - c. Verses 13-18
  - d. Verses 19-22

The Persian king who selected Esther to be his queen is known as Ahasuerus in the Hebrew Old Testament. Ahasuerus is named again in the book of Ezra (Ezra 4:6), being listed chronologically with three other Persian kings – Cyrus (Ezra 4:3,5), Darius 1 (Ezra 4:5), and Artaxerxes 1 (Ezra 4:7). The chronological order of these four kings in Ezra suggests that Ahasuerus should be identified with the Persian king, Xerxes, his Greek name. So, simply, Ahasuerus = Xerxes. He inherited his large kingdom from his father, Darius 1. Under his reign were thousands of Jews who had chosen not to return to Palestine under the direction of Zerubbabel. Our story begins with Xerxes ruling in Susa, which was the winter resort of the Persian kings, adding to the atmosphere of wealth surrounding his kingdom. The king’s throne was in the citadel, which was usually built at the highest and most easily defensible part of the city. This was another demonstration of his power.

The word “Jew” is mentioned over 50 times in Esther, making them some of the main characters! The word “king” is found over 100 times, and the name of the king, over 30. Remember from Lesson 1 that God’s name is never mentioned, yet we see His hand on every page. Psalm 22:28 says, “For the kingdom is the Lord’s: and He is the governor among the nations!”

2. Verses 1-2 gives us a glimpse inside this palace! Why did King Xerxes throw his first party? How long was it? How many other “parties” or banquets do you find in this chapter? What do you think this tells us about the king’s character?

Eastern kings loved to throw lavish banquets to show off their wealth and royal power. They loved to impress everyone! It was also done to foster loyalty among the troops, especially in preparation for war, which he was planning. King Xerxes was planning to wage a war in Greece, so he most likely wanted to build confidence in his troops. The first party was for the key military and political officers of the empire. It was a picture of luxurious dining and drinking. The second one, given for the people of Shushan, in verses 5-8, was held in the royal garden and lasted seven days. The king supplied the food and drink which became a drunken party. Archaeology tells us that King Xerxes' throne room resembled a Grecian temple, and the hall alone covered between two and three acres. Carolyn Custis James wrote, "Both banquets were eye-popping spectacles of the glories of his kingdom – extravagant affairs his guests would talk about for the rest of their lives. No one witnessing such staggering exhibits of power, wealth, and luxury was in doubt of Xerxes' might and authority. The world belonged to Xerxes." He had what's also been called an "unrestrained Mardi Gras"!

3. Read verses 9-12. We enter another royal feast, given by the queen. What's her name? What was she commanded to do during the party? Why?
  
4. We aren't told if what Vashti did was right or wrong. What are your thoughts? Was it bravery or stupidity? Why is this still considered such a courageous act? What could have happened?

We'll talk more about Vashti tomorrow, but for now, ponder the courage it must have taken for her to stand up against the king. Whether you think she was right or wrong, it was a brave act. She made a decision to maintain her integrity rather than her position.

**Memory Verse of the Week:** "... let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she." Esther 1:19b

### **Second Day**

**Work on your memory verse.**

1. Read Esther 1:1-22 again, focusing on verses 9-12. Let's continue the discussion on the first lady in our drama, Vashti.

Let's talk about Vashti's decision again. I've read many opinions on her refusal to appear before the king. (It's cool that her name means "sweetheart" or "beloved" which I think describes her.) We know she offended the king on three levels; one as a woman, one as a wife, and one as a loyal subject. He had extended a formal invitation to her, sending his eunuchs to escort her to him. Eunuchs were regarded as very trustworthy and used often as keepers of harems. After throwing an "out of the park" party to display his wealth and power to impress everyone, here would be the grand finale! But what was King Xerxes actually asking her to do? Jewish scholars differ on their opinions. Charles Swindoll wrote, "The word 'crown' literally means 'turban.' Some Jewish scholars suggest that the command was for Vashti to come unveiled to show off her beautiful face. Others suggest that the command was for her to come wearing only the turban, thus showing off everything." Whatever was meant, we know he was asking her to come and flaunt her beauty in front of a bunch of drunken men. Some experts say Vashti's refusal is an example of a woman who courageously stood up for purity and integrity. This opinion says that although she lost her position as a queen, she maintained her dignity and self-respect. Many scholars believe that the king knew the custom of Eastern women was to live in seclusion and for her to appear in a banquet hall would be immensely degrading. From what I understand, it was the habit of Persian kings to have his queen beside him at a banquet, but when he wished to riot and drink, he would send his wife away and call in the wives of inferior rank, or the concubines. His command violated social etiquette for any self-respecting Persian woman. Still others argue that she wasn't asked to do anything lewd or immoral. Hmmm ....

2. Do you think the king would have done this if he had been sober?
3. As wives, we are called to submit to our husbands as seen in Ephesians 5:22-24. Are there limits to this submission?

Swindoll wrote, "Submission is clear, but is not absolute and without limits. The woman does not give up her dignity as a human being when she becomes a wife. Neither should she allow her principles to be trodden underfoot by an unprincipled husband. Marriage does not give the husband the license to pursue his basest sexual fantasies, and neither does it enslave the wife to fulfill them." Some other limits would be when asked to do something immoral, dishonest, or illegal.

Whatever your opinion, we know that God used Vashti's refusal to enable Esther to become queen and deliver the Jews. He used her removal for His will to be done. God reigns with absolute sovereignty and is at work in the lives of His people. The first step in His perfect plan was to remove the existing queen to make way for Esther. This was God's perfect plan, in His perfect way, at the perfect time.

4. Can you remember a time when God used a "bad" situation to accomplish His will in your life?

I really like the character of Vashti. It took a lot of guts to do what she did. She risked her life to stand up for what she thought was right. He very well could have killed her for embarrassing him in front of all his loyal subjects. But she did it anyway. Her character meant more to her than her husband's power. She stood up to the most powerful man in the land at the expense of her throne and her marriage. She certainly was a woman with convictions. I pray her example of standing up for justice speaks volumes to your heart. Does any principle mean that much to you that you would be willing to risk losing your job, or a significant relationship, over it?

5. Have you ever risked "all" by standing up for doing the right and honorable thing, because of principle?

Charles Swindoll wrote, "Most of us tend to live by expedience rather than by principle, making decisions, not on the basis of our convictions, but on the basis of possible consequences. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, however, opposed this thinking: "If we claim to be Christians, there is no room for expediency."

6. Can you describe a time when you compromised your convictions because of the consequences you thought would result? Looking back, how do you feel about that?

Herbert Lockyer wrote, “Vashti had a soul of her own and preserved its integrity; and if women today fail to honor their life they will never win the best that God has for them. It is to be regretted that in our modern world many women are not as careful as Vashti the pagan was in guarding the dignity of her body. Fashion and popularity are a poor price to pay for the loss of one’s self-respect.”

7. What do you think of the above quote? What do you think Herbert is referring to?

We don’t know what was in Vashti’s heart, as far as what motivated her. She was a pagan, so it wasn’t because of her fear of Jehovah God. But our motivation to do right is because of our “fear of and love for” God. Proverbs 14:26 says “In the fear of the Lord there is strong confidence, and His children will have a place of refuge. The fear of the Lord is a fountain of life, to avoid the snares of death.” Vashti didn’t seem to fear the King, and likewise, we don’t have to fear man. Ever.

8. What do the following verses say about fear?

- a. Psalm 27:1
- b. Psalm 34:9
- c. Psalm 111:10
- d. Proverbs 29:25
- e. Ecclesiastes 12:13
- f. Hebrews 13:6
- g. Matthew 10:28

9. How can fearing God rather than man affect your decisions? Do you ever struggle with this?

Let’s end here for now. Tomorrow we’ll look at how the king responded to Vashti’s rejection. May we, like the queen, be women of conviction, principle, and morality.

### **Third Day**

**Are you working on memorizing your verse?**

1. Read chapter one again. According to verse 12, the king was furious and reacted in anger. Anger and drunkenness ... not a good combination. How does Xerxes respond to Vashti's refusal?
  
2. What effect do his counselors think Vashti's behavior will have on the rest of the kingdom? How would it affect the whole community?

These wise men functioned as counselors, analyzing a situation and giving advice to the king. Their duties went beyond that, though, as they were responsible for preserving and transmitting the culture and learning of their society. So, within Persian society, the king's wise men were the "express in matters of law and justice." (1:13) This situation, they feared, would upset the tradition of male leadership if women followed Vashti's example.

Throughout the book, Xerxes listened to the counsel of others in a negative way. History tells us that he was impulsive and a people pleaser. He was known as a "puppet" king with several of his chiefs pulling the strings.

3. In verse 18, who else did the wise men think it would specifically affect? Do you think they may have felt threatened themselves?

These men appealed to the king's ego, knowing how to flatter him and pump up his feelings of self-importance. They seemed to also exaggerate the importance of the event to make sure he listened to them. An inflated ego is a killer.

4. How can an inflated ego cause a person to make unwise decisions?

5. Read verses 19-22. What advice did they give him regarding Vashti? Does he agree?

We see another example of his impulsiveness. His wounded pride and ego caused him to simply "do away" with the woman he appeared to love. Proverbs 14:16-17 tells us that "A wise man fears and departs from evil, but a fool rages and is self-confident. He who is quick-tempered acts foolishly, and a man of wicked intentions is hated."

6. Read Proverbs 14:29 and 16:32. Are you prone to making decisions out of anger, or just out of impulsiveness? Have you ever faced consequences because of it? Can you share?
7. Galatians 5:23 tells us that self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. How does one develop it?
8. In verse 22, letters were written. For what purpose?
9. The chapter ends with a bit of uncertainty. Memucan's counsel wasn't only to demote Vashti. What else does he tell him to do?
10. Whereas Vashti made her decisions based on wisdom and principles, Xerxes made his on feelings, emotions, and .... drunkenness. How important is it to NOT make our decisions based on our feelings?
11. Women weren't esteemed highly or respected during this time period. These guys seemed to fear women who were strong, assertive, or acted independently. Do you think this is still an issue that women face today? How can men benefit from the talents and strengths of women? Why do some men seem to feel threatened?

Great topics to discuss today, right? I pray that we will ask the Holy Spirit to empower us to use self-control in all areas of our life, that we won't allow our egos to become inflated and give us a false sense of self-importance, and that we will follow the counsel of God, not man.

#### **Fourth and Fifth Days**

**Write out your verse from memory.**



Before we go further, let's discuss God's providence for a bit. Let me offer a few definitions for you to ponder:

- a. The word "provident" is derived from the Latin word *providere*. The prefix "*pro*" means "before"; the root "*videre*" means "I see." As monarch over heaven and earth, God sees events before they happen. He can see the future with precise clarity because He is the One who works events according to His perfect plan. (Swindoll)
- b. That continuous agency of God by which He makes all the events of the physical and moral universe fulfill the original design with which He created it. (Augustus Hopkins)
- c. Providence is God's attention concentrated everywhere. (Warren Wiersbe)

As we continue to read through Esther, we can't ignore the evidence of God's providence in every single turn the story takes. This means that even though things appear out of control, He is there. (Ecclesiastes 7:13-14) Everything in our world changes, but God never does. Psalm 90:1-2 says "Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever You had formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, You are God."

I love what Charles Swindoll wrote about this. He said, "Ruth and Esther lived in different worlds, but the same God was present and at work in their lives, even though His name is not once mentioned in the Book of Esther. The God of the fields in the Book of Ruth is also the God of the feasts in the Book of Esther. He guides the poor gleaner in the harvest and overrules the powerful king on the throne. He has His way with both of them, though He never violates their freedom. This fact ought to encourage God's people. Whether you live on a farm, in a small town, in the suburbs, or in the metropolis, God is there and is always at work on behalf of His people. Nobody can escape the watchful eye or the faithful hand of Almighty God, for God 'works all things according to the counsel of His will.' (Ephesians 1:11)

1. How should knowing and understanding the providence of God affect how you live? How you think? Your entire perspective?

As you continue to read Esther, notice the many evidences of God's providential workings, such as: (1) Esther being chosen as queen over all the other candidates, (2) Mordecai discovering the plot to kill the king, (3) The casting of lots for the day to destroy the Jews,

resulting in a date late in the year, giving time for Mordecai and Esther to act, (4) The king's welcome to Esther after ignoring her for a month, (5) The king's patience with Esther in permitting her to hold another banquet, (6) The king's insomnia that brought to light Mordecai's deed of kindness, (7) the king's apparent lapse of memory that led him to honor one of the Jews he had agreed to slay, (8) The king's deep concern for Esther's welfare when he had a harem to choose from.

2. Read Esther 2:1-4. What facts do you find in this section?

There are approximately 4 years between chapter one and chapter two. It begins with "after these things." What things is the author talking about? Most all scholars believe that it's referring to a disastrous defeat in a war Xerxes raged against Greece in 480-479 B.C. Returning from battle and licking his wounds, his thoughts turn back to his beloved wife, Vashti. The decree he had made against her could not be undone. Of course, he had access to many other women, but no one could hold a candle to Vashti.

3. What do you think he may have been feeling?
4. Although he couldn't reverse his impulsive decision, if he could have, and if he put Vashti back on the throne, what could have happened? What would be some of the risks?
5. We don't know if his servants could tell how he felt by his mopey demeanor or whether he told them, but they knew he was lonely. What did they suggest? What did they seem to know about him?

This suggested "beauty pageant" was not as innocent as it may sound. They would gather young virgins and take the selected ones from their homes and confine them to the harem that Hegai, the eunuch, would oversee. David Shepherd wrote, "The 'beauty treatments' which the women received might seem like a benefit. Rather, they were another sign of Xerxes' use of power for self-gratification. The king snatched the most beautiful girls and then treated them not as persons but 'things', which he beatified for his own enjoyment. The whole affair was to

find a woman ‘who pleases the king.’ Ew. Every night the king had a new partner; and the next morning, she joined the rest of the concubines. The one that pleased the king the most would become his new queen. I wonder if many girls hid when the officers came to their town. Did they get married quick to avoid it? Did they run away? Did mothers lie about their daughters? I’m sure I would. Once the girls were with the king, they were stuck and could not marry. They belonged to him, destined for a lonely life in a harem of women. They were now slaves. Custus James wrote, “These young girls who got caught in Xerxes’ net had no say in the matter but were as helpless as slaves. Once brought to the palace, their sole mission in life was to give pleasure to the king – to please his eye, to satisfy him in bed, and to expand his impressive collection of possessions for others to admire.”

We often think this type of slavery is over; it’s a thing of the past. But there are more slaves now in 2018 than there were during the transatlantic slave trade. Human trafficking is a growing enterprise. Over 30 million men, women, girls, and boys are still being used the same way today; for sex, for labor, for “whatever” their owner decides. No one has the right to “own” anyone. Please pray for those enslaved to be freed, for the perpetrators to be caught, and for justice to be done. Lord, please hear our cry!

6. What kind of beauty treatments do you imagine they received? What would that consist of today?
  
7. The king was looking to fulfill his lust with a new toy; simply trying to satisfy his physical appetites and fulfill his emotional needs. It’s so dangerous to look to anything other than God to fulfill us. What kinds of things threaten to draw our affections away from the Lord? What are some of our physical and emotional “appetites”?
  
8. This is a tough question. If this is all part of God’s plan, did Xerxes have any control over his actions? How do you explain this?

People often struggle with this doctrine. If this was destiny, then how is he accountable? Proverbs 21:1 says, “The king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, like the rivers of water; He turns it wherever He wishes.” Weirsbe wrote, “This doesn’t mean that God forced Xerxes to accept

the plan, or that God approved of the king's harems or his sexual abuse of women. It simply means that, without being the author of their sin, God so directed the people in this situation that decisions were made that accomplished God's purposes. The decisions made today in the high places of government and finance seem remote from the everyday lives of God's people, but they affect us and God's work in many ways. It's good to know that God is on the throne and that no decision is made that can thwart His purposes. 'He does as He pleases with the powers of Heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back His hand or say to Him: 'What have You done?' (Daniel 4:35)"

He continues, "There is no attribute of God more comforting to His children than the doctrine of 'divine sovereignty,' said Charles Spurgeon. While we confess that many things involved in this doctrine are shrouded in mystery, it's unthinkable that Almighty God should not be Master of His own universe. Even in the affairs of a pagan empire, God is in control."

9. Do you agree with Spurgeon? Does knowing that God is completely sovereign, completely in control of everything, give you comfort? What kinds of questions or other emotions does it bring up?

10. How does it effect how you view a difficult situation or circumstance you may be facing right now?

Don't be afraid to discuss the hard to understand doctrines. It's healthy; it's good. This is a safe place to ask questions, express doubts and fears, and wrestle with things. It doesn't scare God, and hopefully doesn't scare your leader. Like Wiersbe said, this doctrine is "shrouded" with some mystery. But to me, it just makes God bigger and bigger the more I understand it. I hope it does for you, too.

**Tomorrow we get to meet the heroine of our story, Miss Esther. I can't wait.**

**See you next week!**