

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: [truthfortoday@aol.com](mailto:truthfortoday@aol.com)

**Broadcast Date:** 6 September 2015

**No.** T0901

**Speaker:** Mr. Peter Ollerhead

## Character lessons from Esther: Queen Vashti - valiant or vain

Good morning and welcome to Truth for Today, where we are beginning a series of four character studies, based upon the main persons whom we meet in the Book of Esther. The first of these is Queen Vashti, followed next week by Queen Esther, and then Haman leaving a study of Mordecai to conclude our series, all if the Lord so wills. As I am responsible for this first talk, I think it would be opportune to say a few words about the Book of Esther to set the scene, as it were, for the whole series.

I don't know about you, but Esther was not a book I knew much about in my younger days. In fact, my first introduction to it was through a quiz in a youth meeting, many years ago. The question asked was 'Name the book in the Bible that does not mention God'. Fortunately, the question was not directed at me, as I would have had to look blankly at the quiz master! I know now that the answer is, 'The Book of Esther', which is at least an advance on my position sixty years ago!

With such knowledge in our possession, it might be remarked that such a book that doesn't mention God by name will not be much use to those who wish to know more about Him. I trust that by the time the talk on Mordecai wraps up our short series you will appreciate the Book of Esther is interesting, helpful spiritually and instructive for Christian living. Granted that God is not mentioned directly, yet one can see His influence in the events recorded in this short book, in addition to witnessing His purposes being worked out.

The exact date when this book was written is unknown, though the balance of evangelical scholarly opinion suggests in the region of 400 BC, a few years after the events that are described. It is one of only two books in the Old Testament named after a woman, the other being Ruth. Alone, excepting perhaps Exodus, it deals solely with the persecution of the Israelites, which has been a continuing strand of world history. It has been a feature in my life-time that was especially manifest in the thirties and forties of the twentieth century. Our study of this book recalls a time when the Jews, mainly through Esther and Mordecai, were able to turn the tables on the man Haman, who was bent upon destroying them. One of my favourite commentaries states that: "...the Book of Esther is a profound statement about the heroic resistance necessary for survival in the face of violent anti-Semitism that continues to the present day" (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Huey FB, introductory notes on Esther).

That I think is sufficient discussion about the 'when and why' of the book.

Perhaps I ought to make one last point about the book before I move on to address my subject, which I stated earlier was a character study of Queen Vashti. I would suggest that another purpose of the Book of Esther is to explain the historical emergence of the Feast of Purim, a celebration that is not described in the Torah. What must not be overlooked, when we consider the totality of the book, is God's providential care of His people, which is often implied even if not explicit.

Now we really must proceed to the first chapter of Esther, where we will eventually meet Queen Vashti. Esther 1:2-4 set the scene for the whole of Esther 1 and I read from the English Standard Version of the Bible: "...in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the capital, in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all of his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendour and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days."

Notice from this, the length of time that these celebrations, where the king was showing off his power and glory, namely around six months. The next two verses of our chapter add further details of merry-making and feasting, in addition to highlighting the opulence of the king's court: "And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people in Susa, the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones" (Esther 1:5-6).

I would urge you to re-read these verses at your leisure, as one cannot grasp the beauty of what is described at a single reading. Many of the people there that week would never have witnessed such affluence and riches. They must, at the very least, have been severely and seriously impressed at such a display of super-abundant wealth. My point is that though Vashti has not yet been mentioned, this was the background to her existence. She had a perfect entitlement to a place in this court by virtue of her being queen.

We now arrive at what in my opinion was one of the causes of the dispute between Vashti and Ahasuerus, which led to Vashti's replacement as queen by Esther. I am reading Esther 1:7: *"Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king."*

It is obvious that all who attended had as much to drink as they pleased. Esther 1:8, which I didn't read, states that there was no compulsion on the part of the guests to drink, rather it was available if they wanted to. The amount for their consumption was according to the riches of the king, as we read in Esther 1:7. As the king was very rich, there would be a considerable quantity of wine available for consumption. If they followed the example of the king then, according to Esther 1:10, *"their hearts would be merry with wine."* In a couple of minutes we shall reach the major point of this chapter which, as I said earlier, is the replacement of Queen Vashti by Esther. Sufficient now to point out again that wine was flowing freely.

Esther 1:10-12 narrate how Vashti was instructed, by King Ahasuerus, to appear before him in order to show off her beauty before the people and the princes. Now we have reached the point where the king is enraged and extremely angry because Vashti refused to accommodate the king's request. The behaviour of the queen in this refusal prompts us to ask the question 'Why'. The Bible does not tell us, and in the context of the Book of Esther, it does not matter. However, I wish to speculate in order that we might draw some lessons from what we have read so far.

You might guess from my references to the excessive consumption of wine at the king's feast that I will emphasise the debilitating effect of too much alcohol upon the senses and the self-control of a drunkard. I view the request of the king for Vashti to appear before the crowd, of mainly men, (for Esther 1:9 has told us that she (Vashti) was giving a feast for the women of the palace) as a summons by a drink-fuelled monarch as little more than titillation for the assembled men. FB Huey, in his commentary on this book, states "that some Jewish sources interpreted the order to mean that Vashti was to appear in the nude, except for her crown." Whether this be so or not, I feel that to baldly state, as some do, that Vashti was completely in the wrong to disobey her husband, are themselves in error by ignoring the possibilities that I have outlined.

As we move on, we shall see that Vashti's refusal to obey the king's command had implications for others in the court and the country at large. We must always consider the possible long term effects of our actions. I outlined why I thought the call to dance could have been wrong, yet it is not impossible to contemplate that an amicable solution could have been achieved without the king losing face or Vashti being degraded.

We must now continue hurriedly, for we are almost halfway through our allotted time, but before I do so, can I say to any who have joined us since we began that you are listening to a broadcast from *Truth for Today*. This is the first in a series of four on the book of Esther, so I urge you to listen in at this time for the next three weeks, if the Lord so wills, that you might gain an overview of this seemingly little studied Old Testament book.

Esther 1:13-18 tells of the consequences of Vashti's refusal to obey the king's command, though I shall only read Esther 1:17-18, which state the counsel that his wise men gave to the king! *"For the queen's behaviour will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him and she did not come'. This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behaviour will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty."*

Our behaviour might not be a pattern that affects the whole nation, as did Vashti's, but it is possible that somebody near to us will use it to excuse their misbehaviour. Consequently, it will be far better for us to act in a responsible and honourable way so that if others do imitate us it will be for good rather than evil.

From the immediate context of this section of the chapter, it is obvious that there was no precedent or law to deal with Vashti's refusal, as the king called for his advisors to seek a solution. It is obvious that they were very concerned with the possible consequences, meaning that the resolution for this crisis must be one with severe penalties. Esther 1:19 informs us of the drastic action that was recommended for the king's consideration: *"If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she."*

Esther 1:21-22 tell us that this advice pleased the king, who immediately did as his advisers proposed. Before discussing the ramifications of this advice, which as we have read was gladly accepted by Ahasuerus, I wish to turn for a moment to the danger of making instant decisions that involve others. The prophet Daniel was concerned in a situation where his master, another eastern king, made a law suggested by evil advisers, motivated by envy, that left Daniel in peril of his life (Daniel 6:1-28) Darius was talked into making a law forbidding prayer to be made to any power but himself (Daniel 6:6-9). Daniel, however, continued to pray and to give thanks to his God knowing full well the penalty that awaited him (Daniel 6:10). As we can read in Daniel 6, the prophet was brought safely through the ordeal despite the king's foolish law (Daniel 6:11-28). Another illustration can be found in Matthew 14:1-12, where we can read how Herod gave a foolish promise to a dancing girl (Matthew 14:7), that led to John the Baptist being killed (Matthew 14:8-11). We should always be very careful with our promises and pledges.

What have we learned so far in our study of Esther 1? You will remember that one of the points I emphasised was the effects of alcohol upon our actions and reactions. If I may quote a personal, yet pertinent, memory that has stayed with me for well over sixty years, about the dangers of too much intoxicating drink at the wrong time. It happened while I was working in the motor industry, as an apprentice centre lathe turner. On the day before Christmas, we finished at lunchtime for the Christmas break. When we returned after a couple of days holiday, I learned that the father of another apprentice had been knocked off his cycle as he rode home on Christmas Eve and killed. The offending driver was arrested for driving whilst under the influence. Just think of the sadness in the dead man's home that Christmas and every Christmas. I would suggest, emphatically, that just as too much wine influenced the king's behaviour then, so it still has the same effect today.

The sub-title for this talk was 'Vashti - valiant or vain?' which we considered at some length. I offered the view that I considered Vashti had good reasons for refusing to answer the king's drunken request, but she could have answered in a way that allowed the king not to lose face. Some form of compromise is always possible. Both the king's attitude, and Vashti's response, destroyed the marriage relationship and banished the queen permanently from the court. It is this latter point, of Vashti being replaced by Esther, that I now wish to consider.

In his book, '*Look to the Rock*', (ISBN: 9780851111681), Alec Motyer writes about first and second causes in the biblical revelation. On page 160 we read: "If God were only sovereign in life's pleasantnesses, what an endangered species we would be! But the valley of deep darkness is as much a 'path of righteousness'- that is, a path that makes sense to the Shepherd - as the green pastures. Since, however, our more pressing need in life is to know how to look both personal adversity and the threats of world history in the face, we are invited to stand beside the Creator and see how all things are under His command and control!"

He (Alec Motyer) spends about ten pages enlarging upon the issue of first and second causes, emphasising that it is easy for us to miss, or confuse, the long term purposes of God, which Motyer calls first causes. According to Motyer, the Creator directs all things to their appointed end, to the goal He has set for them.

If you are familiar with the Book of Esther, you will know that when Esther replaces Vashti as queen, she and Mordecai are instrumental in thwarting the evil plans of Haman. As another has written concerning our study over the next three weeks: "The Book of Esther, then, serves the purpose of showing how Divine Providence overrules all things; even in a distant, far country, God's people are still in His hands" (*An Introduction to the Old Testament* Edward J. Young.)

Are we aware that we to in 2015 are precious to Him?

Often, we are naturally concerned with the immediate details of our lives and how events affect us. When we consider the whole scope of the Book of Esther, we must acknowledge how our Sovereign Lord moves in time to bring His eternal purposes to fruition. In Esther's time, God's people were not living in the Promised Land, rather were they in an alien land, yet we have seen in this first chapter how God's providential care is evident by the replacing of Vashti with Esther, so that in due time the Jews would be protected. We are not always aware of the ultimate purposes of the Lord, therefore we only see what Alec Motyer terms 'second causes'.

Hymn number 189 in *Mission Praise* and is also in many other hymnals sums up what I am trying to say so I quote the first verse:

*"God is working His purpose out,  
As year succeeds each year:  
God is working His purpose out,  
And the time is drawing near:*

*Nearer and nearer draws the time,  
The time that shall surely be,  
When the earth shall be filled with the glory of God,  
As the waters cover the sea."*

Arthur Campbell Aigner (1841-1919)

As our time together is almost finished, I want to end with a true incident, which I remember from my school days, in the years immediately after the Second World War. At short notice a supply teacher arrived at our classroom to instruct us in religious studies, as the subject was then called. I remember very little of what the man said other than he was talking about prayer. During the course of his lesson he moved on to the subject of events being random, and things that happened could be put down to coincidence. My question, or even a challenge, to each of us this morning is, whether we believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who controls events to bring about His purposes in our individual lives, in addition to the church at large? We have seen in the first chapter of Esther that "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." Or do we think that all that happens is random and mere coincidence?

May the Lord's blessing be upon you this day and every day.

Good morning and thank you for listening.

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