



**“Who  
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this?”**

**Esther 4:14**

## **The Peril of Unintended Consequences**

Excerpts from Esther

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Last Sunday we encountered a “Fork in the Word” by stumbling on the choice Jephthah had to make between keeping his vow or choosing the path of grace. Keeping one’s vows seems like the right thing to do. After all, we all want to be men and women of our word. But as we saw last week, sometimes keeping your word leads to heartbreak and, in the case of Jephthah’s daughter, death. And not just any death: her death was wrapped up in the self-righteousness of her father who chose law over grace after making a stupid vow.

Jephthah was not the only one in scripture to make a stupid, self-serving vow. The story of Esther pivots on such vows. This morning, we’re going to dive into the book of Esther and discover how not only her life, but the future of the Jewish people hinged on stupid, self-serving edicts.

The story opens with a banquet thrown by “King Xerxes, who reigned over 127 provinces stretching from India to Ethiopia.”<sup>1</sup> That’s Esther 1:1; all of today’s scriptures are from Today’s Living Translation.

History tells us that Xerxes reigned for 21 years beginning in 486 B.C. In the third year of his reign, King Xerxes threw a banquet for all his nobles, officials, and military

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<sup>1</sup> Esther 1:1.

officers and the feast lasted for an incredible 180 days. The banquet was “a tremendous display of the opulent wealth of his empire and the pomp and splendor of his majesty... By edict of the king, no limits were placed on the drinking, for the king had instructed all his palace officials to serve each man as much as he wanted.”<sup>2</sup>

The self-indulgence of the banquet is mind-boggling. No doubt it was intended to consolidate Xerxes’ power and keep his male staff loyal and hard-working. And providing sexual gratification was part of his plan.

“On the seventh day of the feast, when King Xerxes was in high spirits because of the wine,” he told his servants “to bring Queen Vashti to him with the royal crown on her head. He wanted the nobles and all the other men to gaze on her beauty, for she was a very beautiful woman. But when they conveyed the king’s order to Queen Vashti, she refused to come. This made the king furious, and he burned with anger.”<sup>3</sup>

There are a couple of issues here to explore: First, Xerxes had only one queen; but he no doubt had an entire harem of women who may have already been paraded out to the drunken crowd.

Second, we all know that in the New Testament, Paul says that “wives are to obey their husbands.”<sup>4</sup> But there is nothing in the Old Testament that says wives are to obey their husbands. And stories of Abraham and Sarah or Isaac and Rebekah don’t give the impression that Old Testament wives could be ordered around by their husbands.<sup>5</sup> Among common people in those days, marriage was more of a partnership between two people.

You’ve got to give Vashti credit for standing up to the King. Undoubtedly he wanted her to dance *au natural*, and Vashti did not want to be objectified by a bunch of drunks.

Her refusal, however, created a crisis. What if she inspires other women to stand up to their husbands? Chaos will follow, and we can’t have that. So the king’s Yes Men advised Xerxes to formally banish Queen Vashti from his presence, which he did. I wonder if she breathed a sigh of relief!

According to the law of the Medes and Persians, royal edicts could not be revoked. The king had no power to change his mind. And that’s where Xerxes came face-to-face with the unintended consequence of his own edict: “After Xerxes’ anger had subsided, he began thinking about Vashti and what she had done and the decree he had made.”<sup>6</sup> Xerxes and Vashti certainly did not have what we in 2024 America would describe as loving, caring marriage; maintaining harems does not create an environment of trust. Nonetheless, Xerxes missed his queen and regretted his decision. But there was no way he could go back on his word. Doesn’t that sound familiar?

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<sup>2</sup> Esther 1:4, 8.

<sup>3</sup> Esther 1:11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Ephesians 5:22.

<sup>5</sup> John Goldingay, *Ezra, Nehemiah, & Esther*, WJK, pg. 159.

<sup>6</sup> Esther 2:1

In response, Xerxes' advisors put in place a plan to find a new queen. And of course, through a long and arduous—and sexually abusive—process, Esther, a Jewish woman, is eventually selected queen. However, Esther keeps her Jewish identity a secret.

After Esther wins the favor of the king and becomes his queen, a seemingly unrelated event takes place: Xerxes promotes one of his top aides—Haman—to be, in effect, second in command to the king. However, Haman crosses paths with Esther's uncle Mordecai, and he becomes so filled with hatred for the Jew that he dedicates his life to plotting the complete genocide of all Jews. We pick up the story in Esther 3

<sup>8</sup> Then Haman approached King Xerxes and said, “There is a certain race of people scattered through all the provinces of your empire who keep themselves separate from everyone else. Their laws are different from those of any other people, and they refuse to obey the laws of the king. So it is not in the king's interest to let them live. <sup>9</sup> If it please the king, issue a decree that they be destroyed, and I will give [375 tons] of silver to the government administrators to be deposited in the royal treasury.”

<sup>10</sup> The king agreed... <sup>12</sup> So on April 17 the king's secretaries were summoned, and a decree was written exactly as Haman dictated... <sup>13</sup> Dispatches were sent by swift messengers into all the provinces of the empire, giving the order that all Jews—young and old, including women and children—must be killed, slaughtered, and annihilated on a single day. This was scheduled to happen on March 7 of the (following) year. The property of the Jews would be given to those who killed them.

Clearly, King Xerxes was clueless. Haman had just manipulated him into issuing an irrevocable decree. That's when Mordecai springs into action. He communicates with his niece Queen Esther, and, in the key verse of the book says—

“Don't think for a moment that because you're in the palace you will escape when all other Jews are killed. If you keep quiet at a time like this, deliverance and relief for the Jews will arise from some other place, but you and your relatives will die. Who knows if perhaps you were made queen for just such a time as this?”<sup>7</sup>

Esther, in turn, invites both King Xerxes and Haman to first one, and then a second dinner prepared just for them. Haman thinks he is receiving special treatment, but she's just setting him up. After the second dinner, Esther reveals the unintended consequences of Haman's evil plot and the king's rash edict: Esther reveals that she is, herself, a Jewess and in plotting the genocide of the Hebrew people, Haman was plotting the death of the queen. And the king had allowed him to do so by issuing his stupid edict.

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<sup>7</sup> Esther 4:13-14.

When Esther reveals Haman's evil plot, the king is enraged. He had already lost one wife—Vashti—to a rash edict; he wasn't going to lose Queen Esther because of another. In his anger, he has Haman executed.

But there's still one problem: the king cannot repeal his edict calling for the genocide of the Jews. The best he could do was issue a second edict giving the Jews the right to defend themselves. And as a result of that law, 75,000 Persians are killed by the Jews.

The book of Esther is a book of excess and outrageous behavior. A six-month drunken, sexually charged banquet is excessive and outrageous. The sexual abuse of teenage girls—including Esther—who are forced into trying out for queen by sleeping with Xerxes is appalling. The deaths of 75,000 Persians is horrifying. And yet, the story is told matter-of-factly, neither condemning nor condoning the outrageous behavior we find throughout the book. We are left to draw our own conclusions about the outrageous, appalling behavior of the king, of his minions, and the vindictive Jews.

But one thing is clear: it all happened because King Xerxes issued three irrevocable edicts: once banishing Vashti; one calling for the genocide of the Jews; and one which weaponized the Jews. But all three edicts came with unintended consequences, and as we saw last week, the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.<sup>8</sup>

Oddly, there is no mention of the Spirit—or of God at all—in the book of Esther. One of the most striking characteristics of the Book of Esther is that there is not a single mention of Yahweh God anywhere in its ten chapters. Nonetheless, God is clearly but quietly at work behind the scenes.

What also emerges in Esther is the sharp contrast between God and King Xerxes. Notice how Xerxes is trapped by his own edicts. Once he establishes a law, he cannot find a way to change it. On the other hand, we've already seen in the stories of Abraham, Lot, and Moses that God is fully capable of changing his mind. In fact, it appears that changing his mind is what makes God God.

But what about "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"?<sup>9</sup>

God is compassionate; and part of being compassionate is having the ability to be moved by the needs and troubles of others. And our compassionate God is moved when we are in need or in trouble. That means when we sing:

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father;  
there is no shadow of turning with thee;  
thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;  
as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be—

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<sup>8</sup> 2 Corinthians 3:6.

<sup>9</sup> Hebrews 13:8

we are declaring that God's compassion and mercy never change, even if it means that there will be situations in which God changes his mind. And that is because God always keeps open the possibility for grace.

Like Xerxes, we are human. And part of our human frailty is that we can be trapped by the edicts we issue and the laws we make. Our words can hold us hostage.

In contrast, God is the Word. Humans may be trapped in their own words and vows, but not God. Instead, God is liberated by his grace, and his grace liberates us. In fact, God, in his grace, is able to work around our self-serving laws and edicts to bring about his...

Thankfully, the grace of God is not thwarted by our self-serving words and decisions. Even before Xerxes threw that ridiculously opulent banquet, God knew what was in the heart of Haman and that he would plot to destroy the Hebrews. So when Xerxes issued an stupid edict banishing Vashti from his presence, God used that edict to elevate Esther to a place where she could intercede on behalf of the Jews.

When Haman manipulated Xerxes into issuing an edict calling for the annihilation of the Hebrews, God was already putting his grace in motion. The amazing irony of the book of Esther is that God is never mentioned, yet the hand of God is constantly at work and is everywhere present.

Have you ever felt as though God was missing from your life? It may be that God was still present, working behind the scenes, bringing about his grace, just as he did in the book of Esther.

Let us pray.