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Ruth and Esther- 332

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Gender in The Book of Esther

Throughout the book of Esther it is evident that gender is a key barrier that limits the ability of what women could do at the time. There are many rules and laws established in the book of Esther that are meant to create a wall of what different people are allowed to do. On the other hand, regardless of the limitations that are put up by the culture, God's plans still prevail through whoever he chooses and whenever he chooses. God's will and plans are not defined by cultural limitations. For example, there are cultural laws and limitations set up through how women can approach timing, communication, looks, and even their influence. Yet, through this book we see God still uses a person we don't expect, such as an orphan girl, to become a queen and break the barrier of all cultural limitations.

One of the first cultural limitations that we see is that queens are taught that they have to look and act a certain way. Before Esther could even be presented to the king she had to go through a full year of beauty treatments (Esther 2:12). From being an orphan far from the king all of her life she likely had to go through many lessons as to what it would look like to look and act as a queen. Laura Quick studied these cosmetic treatments and said this, "Through cosmetic application, Esther adopts a heavily sexualised persona... The lengthy beauty treatment thus affects Esther's change in status from young orphaned girl to desirable woman and potential queen." (Quick, p. 365). Esther was already said to have a "lovely figure and was beautiful" (Esther 2:7), but the culture and people of the king's palace established that her looks and the

way she acts would now be in their control. Women's looks at the time were also seen as almost property, this is shown early on in the book with Queen Vashti. Jon Levenson's commentary on Queen Vashti being summoned was stated like this, "Having shown off his wealth and his power, Ahasuerus now seeks to show off his wife, as if she is in the same category" (Levenson. p. 47). The queens were expected to look and act a certain way, and if there was any confusion you were either going to learn or could be highly punished.

Even though it looks like Esther's appearance is taken by man, God's light still shines through her and his plans for her are not wavered. The king decreed that "in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women into the harem at the citadel of Susa" (Esther 2:3). This evokes the question of how Esther was consistently able to win over the favor of man while in the competition and presence of the most beautiful women in all of the land. It was said that Esther "won the favor of everyone who saw her" (Esther 2:15), her character and confidence stood out through any appearance or rules that were placed on her. She didn't need anything special to feel that she was a queen or that was important, she already knew it on the inside. This is likely why when it was her time to be presented to the king she would do everything that Hegia, the king's eunuch, suggested. This too was likely liked by the men of the king's palace because of her willingness to fit their agendas. There were many limitations placed on Esther with how she was to look and act, yet even amongst competition she was confident in herself and that God's plans would be fulfilled through her, however that may look.

Secondly, as a queen there are specific laws in place to limit when she is able to do things and her timing is said to be no longer her own. This is exemplified especially with the rules regarding being able to see the king. A queen is said to appear to the king when summoned and stay in her place otherwise. Right from the beginning of her time at the palace she had to go

through a full year of treatments before it was even her turn to meet the king. Also, later on in chapter 5 we see that it had been a month since she had last been summoned even when she was the current queen. These rules were not just set up for her as a queen but also for all women at the time. There were cultural constraints set up in regards to being a woman that are the same across all the nations, from “the least to the greatest” (Esther 1:20). A woman was to respect her husband and every husband was said to be the “ruler over his own household” (Esther 1:22). A woman at this time, because of culture and law, was not in control over her own time and was subject to whatever a man wanted them to do at any time.

God used many of the cultures restrictions on time to ultimately create a stronger character in Esther to carry out his plans. There was a clear barrier of time with how much time Esther was allowed to be with the king. This is exemplified when she spent an entire year training for her moments with the king before she ever knew if she would get to be the queen. This created a character of patience in Esther and maybe even played into her patience towards waiting to present her request to the king. Esther knew how to use the time she was given as she said, “I and my attendants will fast as you do” (Esther 4:16) as she used her time wisely to fast and prayerfully consider what to do before she approached the king in chapter 5. This was an important value shown in Esther when she did not panic for the situation and still went to God to ask for his will before she ever tried to force her own. When Esther asked that King Xexses and Haman would attend her banquets she flipped the power and put the timing in her hands and into God’s timing. The king and Haman were willing to go to two separate banquets on Esther’s time in order to hear her request. Esther had built up through her training a practice of patience that was exemplified when she was not startled by the big moment in front of the king and was able to deliver her request when God’s timing was right.

Even when timing and control was seemingly taken from women at the time, God still worked his timing through Esther to establish his plans. Along with creating a greater character in Esther, God also looks out for Esther by playing a role behind the scenes during much of Esther's story. One example of this is when he reminded the king in chapter 6 that Mordecia had saved his life shortly before Esther presented her request to him. God was working behind the scenes to favor Mordecia and the Jews without Esther ever even knowing of it. Another example of God working behind the scenes is when he gifted Esther with 7 attendants to be alongside her in the kingdom. It is said that, "Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background" (Esther 2:10) yet even though the attendants originally did not know she was a Jew they still became close friends with Esther. We know this because when Esther goes into a time of prayerful consideration on how to approach the king she says, "I and my attendants will fast as you do" (Esther 4:16). Regardless of how Esther came to know the attendants, we can still confidently say that Esther was blessed by God for the attendants that cared about what she cared about and were always alongside Esther throughout her journey as a queen.

One of the main ways that culture had set up a limitation for women at the time was through communication. Right off the gate in the book of Esther we see how men establish that you can only communicate with how they tell you and can never take the initiative. Queen Vashti learned this the hard way in chapter 1 when she stood up to the king, took initiative, and was stripped of her role as queen because of it. Susan Niditch writes, "The book of Esther is about the status quo, maintenance of it, and finding a proper place within it. Vashti's actions mark her as a threat to the status quo, and she is eliminated" (Niditch, p. 33). This status quo is met in communication when whatever the king, or all men at the time, wanted to say they could say it with no hesitation. Women on the other hand were to be careful with their words and in Esther's

case not say anything at all to the king until he calls on her name and allows it. When it came to communication King Xerxes lived a scared lifestyle. He was afraid of anyone approaching him so much so that he commanded anyone who approached him without permission to be put to death, with the exception of him extending the golden scepter. This law could have been put in place after the assassination attempt on his life from chapter 2, but this was also significant because it limited the people who could be around him and communicate with him. The king proves throughout the book that he is emotional and easily persuaded, but he is difficult to find a way to communicate with because of his law.

Culture at the time was set up to live the way the king did and to protect yourself. Esther combats this by living a bold lifestyle and being a bold communicator, trusting that God's plans were bigger than her communication limitations. When it was time for her to speak she was going to speak. This passion is what fueled the line, "And if I perish, I perish" (Esther 4:16). She faced real risk and this was a true life or death situation. Even though the culture taught that all people and especially women were to stay in line and protect themselves, Esther still lived in the confidence of God that he would deliver. She lived in the confidence of God so much so that even if God didn't deliver, and his plans weren't to be fulfilled through her, she was still going to live in a way that was not held down by what others around her said. Remembering that Mordecia said, "And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this" (Esther 4:14) meaning that this was a maybe and only a chance, not a guarantee. Yet for Esther, she was willing to be the communicator that God called her to be even if it meant death.

Esther combats communication limitations too in a wise way of communicating through a way that the king will understand. Ariel Clark Silver says, "Her wise and clever interactions with the men in her text display her careful maneuvers to bring about the deliverance she desires for

herself and her people” (Silver, p. 42). Her wise interactions did not come without preparation as well. As I alluded to earlier, during the fasting of Esther and her attendants at the end of chapter 4 there was likely a prayerful consideration of how to handle the situation and how to approach the king. She knew that the king not only liked parties, but he understood them. From what we know about the character of King Xerxes is that 2 banquets are not a big deal for him. After all, in chapter 1 we hear that he spent 180 days displaying his wealth concluding with an entire 7 day banquet. The king lives a partying lifestyle, and yet he knows that it is special to throw a banquet as well. Knowing this, she was wisely able to put the king in a comfortable scenario that he understood. Esther asked herself how she could present her request to the king and find his favor in a way that he understands and attending a couple of banquets was a wise way to do so. Esther was able to overcome all of her communicational boundaries by trusting in God’s plan, being bold, and being wise with the ways she communicated.

In conclusion, the book of Esther is another example that God’s will can overcome your messy reality. We see throughout the rest of scripture that God is not limited by any different family dynamics, physical attributes, or cultural limitations that man tries to put on. We see through the stories like that of David that there are no limits when it comes to his age, his birth order, or his size that can get in the way of God’s will for his life. We see Jesus do this in his entire time he spent on earth. Gathering disciples that were cast out by men. Making his closest friends the people that man said could never be saved. Not that God comes to destroy or take away the boundaries in our lives, but instead he uses them to show us what he can do. The power of God is shown through his ability to use any situation, even when it seems wrong, for his good and for his will. In the case of Esther, she faced strong boundaries because of her gender, so

strong that her situation even became a matter of life or death. Yet, she trusted God's will and had the confidence to believe in his plans for her life.

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