

WEEK 6
04.08.18

QUEENS IN THE HOUSE: ESTHER AND JEZEBEL

FOCUS VERSE

Proverbs 18:22

Whoso findeth a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the LORD.

LESSON TEXT

Esther 3:8; 8:4-5, 11

8 And Haman said unto king Ahasuerus, There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the people in all the provinces of thy kingdom; and their laws are diverse from all people; neither keep they the king's laws: therefore it is not for the king's profit to suffer them.

.....

4 Then the king held out the golden sceptre toward Esther. So Esther arose, and stood before the king,

5 And said, If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces.

11 Wherein the king granted the Jews which were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the power of the people and province that would assault them, both little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey.

I Kings 16:30-31

30 And Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the LORD above all that were before him.

31 And it came to pass, as if it had been a light thing for him to walk in the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, that he took to wife Jezebel the daughter of Ethbaal king of the Zidonians, and went and served Baal, and worshipped him.

I Kings 19:1-2

1 And Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and withal how he had slain all the prophets with the sword.

2 Then Jezebel sent a messenger unto Elijah, saying, So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time.

I Kings 21:2-3, 7

2 And Ahab spake unto Naboth, saying, Give me thy vineyard, that I may have it for a garden of herbs, because it is near unto my house: and I will give thee for it a better vineyard than it; or, if it seem good to thee, I will give thee the worth of it in money.

3 And Naboth said to Ahab, The LORD forbid it me, that I should give the inheritance of my fathers unto thee.

.....

7 And Jezebel his wife said unto him, Dost thou now govern the kingdom of Israel? arise, and eat bread, and let thine heart be merry: I will give thee the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.



FOCUS THOUGHT

Women are often great influencers, some for godly ends and some for less than righteous ends



CULTURE CONNECTION

The Influence of a Leader

John Maxwell, best-selling author and speaker, has said, “Leadership is influence.” Leaders are not required to have a specific personality or an IQ higher than all their followers. Instead, leaders must simply display the ability to influence others.

There are at least two types of leaders: those who know they are leading and embrace it, and those who have no idea of the influence they exert. But both types are leaders because they have influence. Though the areas in which they lead may be as different as the leaders themselves, the reality is that someone is following them.

Truth be told, all of us are leaders. A mother may not see herself as a leader, but the little

boy or girl tugging on her skirt should be a constant reminder that what she does is being observed by that tiny heart and mind. Employees may not see anything other than their jobs, but their coworkers, who consistently talk with them and ask questions about everything from faith to life issues, are proof that those employees have influence and therefore are leaders.

It is crucial that all of us make sure we are walking through life aware of the influence we have on others. We have the power to lead people to Christ or to drive them far away from Him. Thankfully, there were people in our lives who recognized their influence and allowed the Lord to use them to lead us to Him.

OUTLINE

I. THE TWO QUEENS

- A. Esther
- B. Jezebel
- C. Queens in Likeness and Contrast

II. THE POWER OF INFLUENCE

- A. Esther’s Pleading for Her People Saved Them
- B. Jezebel Was Responsible for the Death of Many People

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

In his book *The Home Beautiful*, James Russell Miller said, “Again let me say that no wife can over-estimate the influence she wields over her husband, or the measure in which his character, his career and his every destiny are laid in her hands for shaping. The sway which she holds over him is the sway of love, but it is mighty and resistless. If she retains her power, if she holds her place as queen of his life, she can do with him as she will. Even unconsciously to her herself, without any thought of her responsibility, she will exert over him an influence that will go far toward making or marring all his future.”

Most of us have heard the saying “If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.” At some point in life, most people have experienced that statement to some degree. On a practical level, this means that oftentimes families are as happy as the mothers who hold them together. Proverbs 21:9 (ESV) attests to this truth: “It is better to live in a corner of the housetop than in a house shared with a quarrelsome wife.”

Even a cursory study of women in the Bible will yield a prevalent common theme: women have great influence over their families and their communities. That same study would reveal that women can use their influence to glorify God or to rebel against Him: from Deborah, the righteous judge and prophetess, to Miriam, the leader of an insurrection against God’s leader; from Abigail, who diffused the wrath of a future king, to Sarah, who encouraged her husband to take matters into his own hands; from Eve, whose fateful deception cursed us all, to Mary, whose faithful obedience made redemption possible for us all. Then there are two queens who both influenced their husband-kings, their nations, and beyond: Esther and Jezebel.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. THE TWO QUEENS

A. Esther

The story of Queen Esther is a delightful, suspense-filled, irony-laden journey of the unlikeliest of heroines. Never underestimate what God can do through someone who is willing to champion the cause of His people. Esther is a shining example of how God delights in doing the impossible through those who fully surrender to Him. The ultimate theme of the Book of Esther is that God keeps His promises and protects His people. God's commitment to His covenant people is demonstrated through the theme of providence. Divine providence is greater than any force that sought to destroy the Jews.

Esther, whose Jewish name was Hadassah, was orphaned as a young girl. Her older cousin Mordecai adopted her and raised her as his own daughter. Mordecai was from the tribe of Benjamin, and as such, was among those taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon. Mordecai and Esther were living in exile in Susa, a city in Persia, under the rule of King Ahasuerus.

The Old Testament is filled with colorful narratives of kings and their exploits, both militaristic and relational. Esther's story intersects the life of King Ahasuerus in dramatic fashion. Conflict in the royal palace provided the backstory to Esther's ascension. The king held a series of banquets, and he demanded the queen, Vashti, to appear. Vashti refused to come and was banished from the kingdom, so a search for the new queen ensued.

After searching throughout the land, Esther was selected as a potential candidate to be queen. She was a strikingly beautiful woman, and she found favor with the eunuch in charge of the king's harem. He provided her with special treatment, including seven of the best handmaidens. For a full year, she experienced a year of purification, which included "six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women" (Esther 2:12). Esther 2:17 describes that when she was presented to King Ahasuerus, he selected her to be queen, chosen above all the other virgins

of the land. Who would have dreamed that a young Jewish orphan would become queen of the land? At the advice of Mordecai, Esther kept secret the fact that she was Jewish, and this act of submission would prove to be critical to saving her people.

B. Jezebel

The name *Jezebel* still stands in infamy because of the many abominable acts committed by this Old Testament queen. Jezebel was the princess of Sidon and the queen of Israel. The daughter of King Ethbaal ("Baal's man") of Sidon, she married newly crowned King Ahab in a contractual agreement that forged an alliance between the two kingdoms. Not only was Ethbaal a king, he was also a priest of the Canaanite fertility goddess, Astarte. King Ahab, her new husband, was weak in the faith of his fathers, which further allowed Jezebel the opportunity to import her pagan worship to Israel. Through Jezebel's influence, Ahab built "an altar for Baal in the house of Baal, which he had built in Samaria. And Ahab made a grove; and Ahab did more to provoke the LORD God of Israel to anger than all the kings of Israel that were before him" (1 Kings 16:32–33). Jezebel instituted a pagan priesthood with 450 prophets of Baal and an additional 400 prophets of Astarte.

Nowhere was Jezebel's influence stronger than in her own family. She was the spiritual leader of the family, molding the children in the paths of wickedness. Her first child, Athaliah, rivaled her mother in atrocious acts. She married Jehoram, king of Judah, and brought Baal worship to that kingdom. After her son Ahaziah's death, she murdered all of her grandchildren in order to ascend to full power. Only Joash survived because he was hidden from her. She ruled over Judah for six years. In her seventh year, Jehoiada the priest brought Joash out of hiding and crowned him king in the Temple. When Athaliah heard the noise of celebration, she entered the Temple to investigate. Jehoiada commanded that she be removed from the Temple and slain. Manipulation and bloodshed flowed from Jezebel and her descendants. Her legacy of deception and destruction paralyzed both Israel and Judah.

C. Queens in Likeness and Contrast

Most stories have a lesson to teach that transcends time and details and speaks to current situations. Some lives inspire, while others provide a chilling warning against journeying on a path away from God. In that regard, both Esther and Jezebel speak volumes to readers today. Both women were selected by their husbands, who were kings, to be their queens. Both were intelligent, bold women who were committed to a cause and leveraged their leadership capabilities to achieve their goals.

The chief difference between these women was how they used their talents and power. Esther was willing to give her life for her people. Jezebel delighted in spilling the blood of the prophets. Esther sacrificed her own best interests to protect those who were defenseless against her husband's decree. Jezebel arranged to have an innocent man falsely tried and killed so her husband could take the man's vineyard. Esther protected the Israelites and obeyed her God. Jezebel sought to destroy the Jews and abolish the worship of the one true God. In short, Esther used her influence for good, while Jezebel used her influence for evil.

II. THE POWER OF INFLUENCE

A. Esther's Pleading for Her People Saved Them

Throughout Esther's narrative, every detail of the situation revealed God's providence at work, making a way for Esther to bring deliverance to her people. When Esther moved to the palace, Mordecai was able to secure a position at the king's gate, which helped him maintain connection with Esther and keep watch for her best interests.

With Esther's ascension to the throne, their lives might have been peaceful were it not for the prideful wrath of one of the king's trusted officials: Haman. In fact, King Ahasuerus bestowed upon Haman honor above all other in his court, decreeing that his subjects should bow down in respect to Haman. If Mordecai proved to be anything, it was faithful to His God, and as a devout Jew, he refused to kneel before Haman. His defiance infuriated Haman, who schemed revenge that would be exacted against all Jews.

Ever the manipulator, Haman portrayed the Jews as a defiant group of people who were a threat to the king. Haman implored the king to grant permission to destroy the Jewish people, and Ahasuerus unwisely agreed to his request. (See Esther 3:8, 11.) Though Esther lived in the palace, Mordecai was more politically connected than Esther; he was the first to share Haman's plot with her.

Could there have been a more bizarre plot line? The king, who had banished his first queen for insubordination, unknowingly decreed for the execution of his beloved current queen. What was Esther to make of this unthinkable turn of events? Before she had time to adequately process the events, Mordecai called her to action. He reminded Esther of her identity as a Jew and charged her with the responsibility of pleading for mercy for her fellow Jews. Perhaps he could sense her fear or even her desire for self-preservation. In what has become the most quoted passage of the Book of Esther, Mordecai exhorted Esther to stand strong:

"For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet you know whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"
(Esther 4:14, NKJV).

With unflinching resolve and commitment, Esther asked Mordecai to call all Jews in Shushan to three days of fasting, and she even asked her servants to join with her. She promised Mordecai that after the three days of fasting, she would go before the king, which could result either in her gaining an audience with him or in being killed as a result of coming before him without being called. There is an invaluable lesson to be learned here: trust in God is being at peace with giving Him permission to decide the outcome of our dilemmas.

At the conclusion of the fast, Esther approached the king without invitation. The Lord gave her favor with Ahasuerus, who held out his golden scepter to her, welcoming her in. Given the erratic nature of his decision making, Esther did not feel comfortable directly sharing her petition with him. She understood

that she would have to approach him in a delicate manner, with the right approach. For the first part of her plan, she invited Ahasuerus and Haman to a special meal prepared for them. At the conclusion of that meal, the king asked about her request. Rather than sharing her petition at that time, Esther invited the two men to come again the next day.

In the meantime, Haman planned destruction for Mordecai, erecting gallows on which to hang him. In the palace that night Ahasuerus could not sleep, and God brought Mordecai to his remembrance, specifically how Mordecai had not been properly rewarded for foiling an assassination plot against Ahasuerus. In an ironic turn of events, Haman came to the king the next morning with the intent of asking permission to kill Mordecai. Before he could make his request, Ahasuerus ordered him to publicly honor Mordecai in the way that Haman thought he [Haman] was going to be honored.

Later that day, Esther prepared another banquet for Ahasuerus and Haman, and it was in that setting that she carefully laid out her case in a manner that appealed to the king's ego. She gently built up the accusation, with suspense mounting, and presented her story in a method that allowed his anger to rise without making him defensive in regard to his own culpability in the situation. With his emotions high, Esther revealed the true adversary: Haman!

Haman was sentenced to death and was hung on the gallows he had prepared on which to hang Mordecai. In an unprecedented reversal of roles, Mordecai was handed Haman's position in the king's court. This was a victory yet not the entirety of what Esther sought. In Esther 8:5, she proceeded to plead for the lives of her people:

"If it please the king, and if I have found favour in his sight, and the thing seem right before the king, and I be pleasing in his eyes, let it be written to reverse the letters devised by Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, which he wrote to destroy the Jews which are in all the king's provinces."

While the decree of Ahasuerus could not be repealed, he did grant a new decree that

afforded the Jews the right to defend themselves and their possessions (Esther 8:11), and that edict was shared throughout all of Persia.

Following the Jews' great victory, Mordecai sent letters to all the provinces calling for a permanent remembrance for them and the generations to come. "To stablish this among them, that they should keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar, and the fifteenth day of the same, yearly, as the days wherein the Jews rested from their enemies, and the month which was turned unto them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day: that they should make them days of feasting and joy, and of sending portions one to another, and gifts to the poor. . . . Wherefore they called these days Purim." (Esther 9:21–22, 26). This holiday is still celebrated by Jews today.

Although God is not overtly mentioned in the Book of Esther, it is evident that He was working behind the scenes to save His people. God alone has the power to orchestrate a series of seemingly inconsequential events in a manner that turned the tables on the plan of the wicked. He reached out with another chance for Israel, working on their behalf.

These were Jews in captivity, assimilated in their land of oppression, who likely had lost the ways of their faith. God did not appoint their situation or sanction their behavior, but He did work through it on their behalf. What greater example of God's providence at work than what He achieved through a young Jewish orphan. Esther went from having nothing, to having everything to lose. In the face of her own possible death sentence, Esther's brave obedience to Mordecai's call saved the Jews in exile and her own life as well.

B. Jezebel Was Responsible for the Death of Many People

Make no mistake—Jezebel militantly planned a hostile take-over for the minds and souls of the Jewish people, and she did so by attacking the prophets of God. She killed all who were not in hiding, but her thirst for blood was not quenched. She would stop at nothing until the prophet Elijah was destroyed. At the command of the Lord, Elijah proclaimed a drought, and departed from Ahab, hiding first by the brook Cherith, and then in the home

of a widow from Zarephath. When God commanded Elijah to return in the third year of the drought, he met King Ahab to challenge all of Jezebel's prophets at Mount Carmel—all 850 of them.

In one of the most dramatic scenes of the Old Testament, Elijah called the people of Israel to a point of decision: to serve the God who answered by fire. The prophets of Baal cried aloud all day, cutting themselves and leaping about, but there was no response. At the time of the evening sacrifice, Elijah repaired the altar of the Lord and made preparations to sacrifice. He drenched the altar and even filled the surrounding trench with water, to prove the power of God. Then Elijah prayed a bold prayer, and the fire of the Lord consumed the sacrifice, the altar, and even all the water. The children of Israel repented, the prophets of Baal were executed, and Elijah declared to Ahab that the drought had ended.

When Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, she responded with a prescient threat: "So let the gods do to me, and more also, if I make not thy life as the life of one of them by to morrow about this time" (I Kings 19:1–2). Once again, Elijah escaped her wrath through the hand of the Lord. In the desert, weary and overwhelmed, God revitalized the faithful prophet. God called him to anoint three men who eventually would eradicate the worship of Baal from Israel. God's power was greater than the rage-filled curses of Jezebel!

Sometimes God's justice does not come until the final judgment, but there are instances when it is meted out here on earth. For Jezebel, her reckoning came in a very public way after she orchestrated the death of an innocent man. King Ahab wanted to buy a field next to his palace from one of his subjects, Naboth. The land was part of Naboth's family inheritance, so he refused to sell it, and this greatly upset Ahab. Jezebel pledged to get the land, and put forth a scheme that falsely accused Naboth, which resulted in his being stoned to death. She proudly presented the land to the king, a vineyard that was obtained through the death of innocent man.

Their celebration was short-lived, however, as Elijah once again appeared to confront their sins. The prophet foretold calamity for Ahab, and a gruesome end to the life of

Jezebel: "And of Jezebel also spake the LORD, saying, The dogs shall eat Jezebel by the wall of Jezreel" (I Kings 21:23). The story of her violent demise is told in II Kings 9:32–37. She was thrown down from the window by her trusted eunuchs, and her dead body was devoured by animals. The life of one who had shed so much blood ended in an equally brutal manner.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Influence can be a powerful tool for good or for evil. Each person is given a measure of influence, some to a greater degree than others. Women, in particular, can have substantial sway with their families and beyond. The manner in which that power is used can either build or destroy lives—affecting both the person of influence as well as those being influenced. The way people choose to expend their influence is directly related to their view of stewardship. Individuals who understand that their lives are not their own will be more likely to use their influence in a way that brings glory to God.

Proverbs 31:10 asks, "Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies." Throughout the remainder of the chapter, many virtuous qualities a woman can possess are listed. Some of these traits are related to her actions (hard work, planning, preparedness, and so forth), while some reflect her character (hopeful, kind, trustworthy, and so forth). The most important qualities she possesses, however, are related to her love and devotion: she honors the Lord, her husband, and her family. She brings good to her world, her heart is to care for the defenseless, and she is promised that she will be rewarded. Esther's life is a testimony to the type of positive influence that flows from a virtuous woman, but Jezebel is a cautionary tale of a woman whose lust for control destroyed everything she touched.

What can be learned from Esther. For those who feel that God can never use them, Esther sounds a clarion call that God equips those whom He calls. The very thing that would seem to disqualify someone may be the avenue through which God moves. As a Jewish orphan living in exile, Esther's ethnicity should

have prohibited her from consideration as queen. Her Jewish identity could have secured a death sentence against her, even as queen. Yet her entire nation was rescued because she fulfilled her God-given destiny.

Mordecai's life hung in the balance, but in a matter of hours, Haman was executed on the same gallows he had constructed for Mordecai. Difficult circumstances can be transformed for our good and for the good of others. Sometimes the gallows that seem to be prepared to destroy a child of God are, in fact, prepared to destroy the enemy. Pain and struggle will not destroy someone living in covenant with Him but ultimately will destroy the work of Satan. God will bring freedom through these struggles and bring glory to Himself through any situation. We should pray for the courage to make decisions that will honor God's plan, no matter the circumstance.

What can be learned from Jezebel. One of the most basic lessons that can be learned from the life of Jezebel is the danger of marrying someone who is not a follower of Jesus Christ. When someone does not share the same spiritual values (is unequally yoked) as his or her spouse, at best, the family will be fractured; at worst, the spouse can turn the believer and their children against God.

Jezebel's actions revealed the extent to which individuals will be driven when they are ruled by covetousness and unchecked thirst

for power. Perhaps the most compelling lesson from the life of Jezebel is the fact that evil will never triumph over God's power. Satan's forces may be rising, seemingly standing strong and bold. It may even appear that evil has overtaken good, but make no mistake—God's cause will always triumph.

Whether justice is administered here on earth, as was the case with Jezebel, or whether the day of reckoning comes in eternity, God will not be mocked and His people will not be destroyed. We will reap what we sow, and the only way to avoid condemnation is to repent and turn to God. The best news of all is that no one is beyond God's grace. The blood of Jesus covers a multitude of sins, washing clean even those who have spilled the blood of others. His forgiveness flows freely, and His Spirit can completely transform their sin and shame.

Like these two women from the Old Testament, we have the power to choose how we will use our influence. It can be sinfully wielded to manipulate others with self-centered motivations, as was the choice of Jezebel. On the other hand, influence can be surrendered completely to God's providence, for His glory, and an entire nation can be saved as a result, which was the testimony of Esther. The choice is ours to make today.

(Note: Portions of this lesson have been adapted from notes written by this lesson's author for the *Apostolic Study Bible*.) ■

REFLECTIONS

- How is the providence of God demonstrated throughout the story of Esther?
- How different could Jezebel's story have been if she, like Esther, had used her influence in a godly manner?
- Where has God given us influence? With whom has He given us influence?
- Do we use our influence to manipulate others in order to achieve our own desires or goals? If so, how can we overcome that struggle?
- Are we willing to sacrifice for others in order for God to receive glory through us? Are we intentional about pointing others to God, sharing His love and gospel with those He has placed in our lives?
- What kind of stewards are we of the measure of influence God has imparted to us? Do we prayerfully seek opportunities and resources to influence others for good?