

## Beauty and the Beast

Esther 2:1-18

By [David Strain](#)

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Now if you would, take your Bibles and turn with me to the book of Esther chapter 2. If you're using a church Bible, you'll find that on page 410 and 411. The title for our series of studies in the book of Esther is *Sudden Reversals*. If you were with us last Lord's Day Evening in chapter 1, you would have seen one such sudden reversal. Queen Vashti was deposed from her throne and exiled from the presence of the king. And as we read chapter 2 together in just a moment we will see another sudden reversal, actually in the opposite direction completely. Before we turn to hear the Word of God read and preached, would you bow your heads with me as we pray? Let us pray.

*Our Father, we would be like those Greeks who came to the disciples saying, "Sir, we would see Jesus." Would You show us Christ in this passage from Your holy Word? To that end, give us Your Spirit, the Spirit of Your Son who will glorify Him and take of what is His and make it known to us. Do that in this text and in our hearts for Your own glory and honor in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Esther chapter 2 at verse 1. This is God's own holy Word:

After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's young men who attended him said, 'Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' This pleased the king, and he did so.

Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had

a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women - when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

Amen, and we praise God that He has spoken to us in His holy and inerrant Word. May He write its eternal truth upon all of our hearts.

## **GOD'S WORD AND THE REAL WORLD**

Esther chapter 2 is the Bible's Cinderella story. It is a romantic drama of which every Disney princess would be proud. It features a beauty pageant in which the church girl wins the day and impresses everyone with her winning smile. What

an example Esther is for little girls everywhere?

In this way, one of the worst abuses of Scripture is perpetrated by well-meaning, contemporary Bible readers all over the place. Esther chapter 2, far from overflowing with romance, is full of moral ambiguity and spiritual compromise. Esther 2, instead of offering us an example to follow invites us to face the reality of life in which women are often objectified and made victims, where men can be predatory, and where at least for some, fear is often more powerful than faith. Esther chapter 2 is not an exciting episode of "Persia's Got Talent." It is, rather, a dark and uncomfortable tale of abduction, even of abuse. And yet it is here, amidst all the moral ambiguities and the shocking abuses that dog Esther's steps, that we are being invited to trace the footprints of the sovereign God who is working in and through and despite the sin and suffering that we find here, for the good of those who love Him and who have been called according to His purpose. Esther 2 does not flinch from narrating for us this simple, ugly fact of life in ancient Persia, where people are treated as commodities. It is no fairytale story of a poor, Jewish girl falling in love with prince charming. Esther 2 is a story, the like of which when we hear it on the news we can scarcely bear to contemplate. One thinks, for example, of Amanda Berry, Gina DeJesus, and Michelle Knight, who were rescued after a ten-year abduction in Cleveland, Ohio. There is no escapism here. Esther 2 is the real world.

And actually, for some of you here this evening, that fact alone may prove to be extremely important because it tells you that God's Word speaks to the extremes of our experience even when our society doesn't know what to think. The Lord is not confounded when the unthinkable happens. He is not silent when tragedy and sorrow and sin break in on us and leave us broken. The prison of silence that can hold victims enslaved to shame and confusion is, or can at least begin to be, unlocked by passages like this one where the dark things that we are unable to share with others are named here and faced here by the God of wisdom and love. He has a word for abused and for abusers. He has something to say to the naïve and to the cynical. His Gospel is a real world Gospel that works in the darkest realities of our lives. Esther 2, as bleak as it is, offers us unspeakable hope. So would you look at it with me please, Esther chapter 2?

Back in the first chapter, remember Ahasuerus drunk and enraged at the refusal of Queen Vashti to submit to the leering stares of the royal court, Ahasuerus resolves to dismiss her and to find a new wife. As chapter 2 opens, sometime later, his anger is spent. We're told he "remembered Vashti." Often in the Old Testament Scriptures, that language of remembering someone is used of God, and it indicates his commitment to remembering someone for goods. It indicates faithfulness and a determination to show mercy. But if something of that order is being indicated here, and Ahasuerus has begun to think of Vashti more positively, perhaps with some regret, the author of also very quick to add that the king knows that he has been caught in his own impulsive folly. His decree to banish Vashti was irrevocable and no matter his private feelings now in the cold

light of sobriety, he could not legally restore her. And so he calls his advisors who propose, verse 2, for a search to be undertaken for the most beautiful women of the empire who are to be brought like animals to stock the king's harem. From among them, surely someone must be found who can take Vashti's place. This plan, verse 4, "pleased the king." Whatever pangs of remorse he had been feeling for Vashti are now forgotten as his lust ignites afresh. It's actually a classic strategy of the un-renewed human heart. Incapable of repentance, unbelieving hearts can only avoid guilt. They can ignore guilt, they can hide guilt beneath a blanket of indulgence, but they can never really remove guilt. We know, many of us don't we, there's only one thing that can do that - the blood of Jesus Christ that can cleanse our consciences from dead works that we may serve the living and true God.

And so as the curtain falls in this opening scene in the court of Ahasuerus, notice that it also rises on a very different scene altogether - a little Jewish family, living in the citadel of Susa, in entirely different circumstances. Actually, in 538 B.C., by decree of King Cyrus, most of the Jewish citizens of the empire have returned to Judah. A little over a generation before the events narrated here for us. But many of them remained, scattered throughout the empire, having done as the prophet Jeremiah counseled them - [Jeremiah 29:6](#). They had settled down, they had built homes and businesses, they had married and given their daughters and sons in marriage, and so this is now their home. And so they remain exiles in a pagan land. Verses 5 and 6 make that point with regards to this family with some force. Literally they say something like this. "There was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai who had been exiled from Jerusalem among the exiles who were exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had exiled." We get the message, don't we? Mordecai and Esther are exiled. That is, though they live in Susa, they belong to the people of God, and that changes everything. They are strangers in a strange land, exiled to be sure, but they're not cut off from the covenant of promise or from the commonwealth of Israel. Whatever else happens, our author is indicating to us - "Keep your eyes on this family. God is not done with His people yet."

So as verses 1 to 4 give us some insight into the causal, immoral brutality of the Persian court, in verses 5 to 7 we have a very different picture. Here we see a covenant family struggling to survive. By all appearances, they have accommodated and assimilated well into the host culture that they inhabit. Mordecai is a pagan name. It means "man of Marduk." Marduk was one of the Babylonian pantheons. Similarly, Esther's name probably references Ishtar, the goddess of love and war. Although here, verse 7, she's introduced to us by her Hebrew name, Hadassah. Orphaned at some point, she is adopted by Mordecai who, verse 11, bears eloquent testimony, seems to have been utterly devoted to her. This is a household that has known tragedy and loss. It is a household that has labored to accommodate to the culture, to live comfortably in a pagan land, while still trying at all odds to cling to its roots.

Esther's two names actually suggest the challenge facing the people of God in exile - to which world does she really belong? There are two Esthers. There is Hadassah, child of the covenant, citizen of the kingdom of God. And Esther, the pretty Persian girl, about to be swept up into a maelstrom of sorrow and responsibilities she did not know she would ever be called upon to face. How do they relate to one another? Can they be reconciled? That's a dilemma, actually, that every member of the covenant community continues to face even to this day. If we are Christians, we are called to live and be in the world but not of it. But many of us find ourselves with two identities, don't we? Living double lives, uncertain how to bridge the gulf that lies between them. We feel keenly the reality of the social risk that we take if we declare ourselves for Christ and begin to live an obedient life in keeping with our profession. We feel just how powerful the pressure to conform to the pattern of this world really is, and so like Esther and Mordecai we find ourselves caught on the horns of a dilemma. We instinctively recognize that the path of obedience and faithfulness may be very costly indeed. That's certainly something Mordecai has recognized in verse 10 when he counsels Esther not to admit, not to own her identity as a Jewish girl. Esther chapter 2 raises a question that actually the book with not resolve until later on. But even knowing that the hero and the heroine of the book of Esther face the same dilemma that we face, signals to us that God is not indifferent to the challenge. To be sure, the Lord calls us to faithfulness in ways that will be costly, but as the rest of the book will make clear, God is no one's debtor. Those who honor Him, He will honor.

And so now the stage at last is set, and as the mighty resources of Persia swing into action to implement the king's decree, Esther's life is about to change forever. Susa is now packed with young women who have been gathered from all across the empire, placed under Hegai's care, all of them about to compete for the queen's position, and Esther is suddenly placed among them. Now understand this is not a voluntary thing. It was not an open contest in search of the next "Miss Persia." As the language of verse 8 indicates, Ahasuerus gathering victims into his harem under compulsion were necessary. Esther, we're told in verse 8, "was taken into the king's palace," that is, she did not fill out an application. Her life and the lives of the other young women in the harem have been disrupted. They were going in one direction and now suddenly they were snatched from that court to become the play-things of the king.

It's not long, however, before Esther begins to find favor in the sight of Hegai. She begins to receive privileged status and benefits for while the next year she and the other women are crimped and scraped and tweaked and beautified. And then one by one, they are required to spend the night, each of them in turn, in the king's bed. As the story reaches its conclusion, Esther wins the throne, we learn, on the basis of her night with the king. Though some want to exonerate Esther, "Nothing ever happened that night," they will say. Others want to blame Esther as though to accuse her of using sex as a tool to power. The truth, however, is that Esther has been manipulated and abused, she has been emotionally,

psychologically broken; Esther's a victim. So we don't need to amend the text to clean it up. We don't need to scold Esther as though she were an ambitious, modern starlet trying to sleep her way to a position of influence. Rather, we need to read these words with grief and empathy, recognizing in this story a tale that has been told and continues to be repeated all over the world in every culture and in every age.

But as we take all of that in, the ugliness and the pain of it, imagine being Mordecai, watching the daughter of your heart taken away by the king's men to live in the harem as one of his concubines, the horror and the pain and the ugliness of it, we need to see that despite it all, God is at work to build His kingdom. How does God build His kingdom in a world as dark as this one? That's the question Esther chapter 2 forces upon us. I want to give two answers that I think we find here.

### **GOD MAKES EVEN HIS ENEMIES SERVE HIS ENDS**

First, the first way God builds His kingdom is that He makes His enemies, even His enemies, serve His ends. God makes even His enemies serve His ends. He uses wicked men and sinful deeds and He thwarts their evil design and bends them to His own purposes. The young men in verse 2 who come up with the plan that eventually leads to Esther's selection as queen, they're described, interestingly, in language that is used of the prophet, Samuel, at the occasion of his call, as though to suggest to us that these men, no less than Samuel, though these men unwillingly and inadvertently, yet truly become instruments in the fulfillment and execution of the plan of God. They are like Caiaphas, you remember, Caiaphas the high priest in [John 11:51](#). He pours out venom and hatred and vitriol for Jesus when he argued that Christ should die for the people, actually not knowing at all that his words were prophesying the very thing that would redeem God's Church. So too, their wickedness notwithstanding, the advice of the king's counselors actually leads to the positioning of Esther in the only place where she could save the people of God. The crass and abusive contest for the queen's title is utterly wicked to the core and the suffering of those subjected to it can't be minimized. And yet the painful rise of Esther to the throne of Persia meant salvation for the covenant people of God.

If you were to ask Joseph, you remember Joseph and his multi-colored coat? If you were to ask Joseph after his enslavement and imprisonment and poverty and all the abuse he endured, if those trials were anything other than evil he would say, "Of course not." And yet confronted with the very brothers who sold him into slavery years later he could say with tears, "What you intended for evil, God intended for good." There's a great mystery there. But for anyone who has suffered at the hands of another and who has begun to rest in God's sovereignty, it is nevertheless a precious truth, all of its mystery notwithstanding. What you intend for evil, God intends for good. That is a word to cling to. What was

intended for evil, God intends for good. So in the first place we learn here that God makes even His enemies serve His ends.

## **GOD USES HIS WEAKEST SERVANTS FOR HIS GREATEST WORKS**

And then secondly and finally we are being taught to see that God uses His weakest servants for His greatest works. God uses His weakest servants for His greatest works. Notice that at the heart of God's design, at the heart of the message of this chapter, stands Esther herself. Her eyes linger, don't they not, on the lust of emperor Ahasuerus nor on the distress of the victims nor on the opulence of the harem. Our author has riveted our eyes on Esther. In verses 1 to 4 we saw the callous, unfeeling power of the court of the king on full display. But then in 5 to 7 there is an abrupt contrast. Here's Esther and Mordecai with a broken, tragic home, struggling to work out how to sing the Lord's song in a strange land. It's a study in contrast. Amoral Ahasuerus, all glory and riches and debauched power, and Esther, the very picture of paragon of weakness - an orphan, a woman, a Jew - a combination at that day and in that location certainly calculated to place her on the margin, disenfranchised and outcast. And she is taken, she is, we would say, abducted, forced into a life she would never choose for herself. She has no power and influence. So who is it that God uses to accomplish His purposes and advance His kingdom? How is the kingdom of God built? Not by the mighty and the noble and the strong, not by Ahasuerus, not by the power brokers and the culture-shapers, not by the influential or the impressive. God uses an abused, outcast girl, hiding her Judaism in abject fear. It is the weak things and the things that are naught that God uses to shame the wise and bring to nothing the things that are.

When we are tempted to think that the kingdom of God advances because we might be able, perhaps, to bankroll its ministry, when we're tempted to think the kingdom of God advances because we can call on the great and the good to sponsor its causes, when we're tempted to believe that the politics of the world establish the kingdom of heaven, remember Esther. Remember Esther. In fact, it's precisely here, in her abject weakness and brokenness, a victim of the malice and hatred of the mighty and the political elite, it's precisely here that Esther preaches the Gospel to us. It's here that she reminds us of Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory who could, at a word, level His enemies, stripped and beaten and nailed to a Roman cross, utterly weak, for us and for our salvation, one who, though He was rich became poor that we might become rich in Him. Jesus redeems and saves His Church by His cross. Esther 2 reminds us God uses His weakest servants for His greatest works. It reminds us Christ saves by a cross, by a bloody cross, where He pours out His life for us. And it teaches us that our lives, if they are to serve Him in response, must be cruciform too.

Martin Luther, famously contrasted the theology of glory with the theology of the cross. By a theology of glory he meant any approach to the Christian life that

looks for outward displays of earthly power as its principal means of advancement. Instead, Luther said, “Crux probat omnia” - the cross is the test of everything. Is it cruciform? Is it cross-shaped? Is it broken and dependent upon God in Christ by His Spirit? Is it self-effacing and God-exalting? Does it despair of earthly influence and yet in humility discover that God’s influence is being advanced? Such is a life that Esther 2 would teach us, that God will bless because it is a life that mirrors and echoes and looks like the life of Christ. This is the life to which Esther 2 is calling us. God builds His kingdom, do you see, in the real world - a dark place of brokenness and sin and pain, and He does it first by making even His enemies serve His ends and He does it secondly by using His weakest servants for His greatest works. Amen. Will you pray with me?

*Our Father, we bless You for Your holy words and we come to You acknowledging with gratitude the darkness of our world and the reality of our trials and the precious character of Your Word that speaks into them all and calls us not to strive for power and influence but to live a life that is cruciform as we rest on Christ, who was crucified and risen for us. Give us grace to look to and to cling to Him, that all the glory and honor might be His alone. In Jesus’ name, amen.*

Please stand and receive God’s blessing.

And now may grace, mercy, and peace from Almighty God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be with you all now and forevermore. Amen.

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