

SERIES: The Book of Esther

SERMON: **Introducing the Hero and the Heroine**

SCRIPTURE: Esther 2

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Introduction: Last Lord's Day we launched a summer series on the book of Esther. It's rare that I urge you to go to our website to read sermons, but I want to do that today. If you missed last week's sermon, I hope you will go back and read it (or listen to it) because we offered a lot of background information that is important in order to put the rest of the story in context.

In the first chapter the author of Esther heaps subtle satire on the Empire of Persia and on the most powerful monarch of the fifth century before Christ, Xerxes the Great. The king was so incredibly pompous and self-important that he put on a six-month's-long World's Fair, showing off his enormous wealth to the world and culminating in a 7-day feast that was the mother of all banquets.

On the last day of the banquet, when he and probably most of his nobles were drunk, Xerxes summoned Queen Vashti to the banquet so he could show off her beauty to this huge stag party. She courageously refused. So the King called a special meeting of his fawning and obsequious advisers, who urged him to pass an irrevocable decree that Vashti be banished from the king's presence and her crown given to someone better than she, meaning certainly someone more submissive.

The real motive behind this edict seems not so much punishment of Vashti as fear that her behavior would catch on throughout the Kingdom and a Persian version of the Women's Lib movement would destroy life as these chauvinists knew it. This edict was published throughout the Empire and in every language, the key point being "that every man should be ruler over his own household."

I stressed last week the humor that is found just under the surface of this account. I believe the author wants us to laugh at the Empire and to realize that its power is piously and temporary as compared with the power and providence of God.

The other key theme we examined last Sunday was really preparation for today's message. We talked about the fact that the main characters of our story starting in chapter 2 are Jewish exiles, descendants of the captives Nebuchadnezzar seized when he destroyed the Southern Kingdom of Judah over a century earlier. Though Cyrus the Persian Emperor permitted the Jews to return to their homeland after the Babylonian Captivity, most of them chose not to go, having become comfortable and successful in the Empire.

We also spoke of the Empire in which we live. We too are exiles, spiritual exiles, and as such we must be careful not to take the Empire too seriously. We should even learn to laugh at its pomposity and self-importance. Today, however, we shall discover that engaging the Empire is not always a laughing matter, and achieving success in the Empire can come at a very heavy price. By the way, next Sunday is the Fourth of July, and Pastor Phil is going to preach on *The Plight of the Undocumented Immigrant* from 1 Peter 2. This is not going to be about Mexican

illegals—it's going to be about us—spiritual exiles in a hostile world.

We pick up the story of Esther in chapter 2. It's a long chapter, but it's so interesting I don't think you'll have any trouble tracking with me.

Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Before a girl's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. And the king gave a great

banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.

During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were hanged on a gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

The king's advisers develop a plan to replace an uppity queen. (1-4)

The Seven Stooges we met last week had come up with a brilliant plan to preserve the King's honor (and their own), but they apparently hadn't thought through the logistics of finding a new queen. With the King having second thoughts about Vashti, they realize they need a way to distract him, and what better way than a harem full of beautiful young virgins from which he can choose his new queen? So they propose a nationwide beauty contest. These young women would be placed under the supervision of the head eunuch, would go through year-long beauty treatments, and then would audition one by one before the king. The girl who pleased the king most would take Vashti's place. Not surprisingly, considering what we know already about Xerxes, "This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it."

But before we go further in our story, the hero and the heroine must be introduced.

Mordecai and Esther are introduced. (5-7)

Mordecai's status as an exile is stressed. In the space of a few short verses we are told quite a lot about Mordecai. First of all, his name is probably a Babylonian name, as Marduk was the Babylonian sun-god. It was not unusual for Jews to be given Babylonian names. Daniel's Babylonian name was Beltshazzar, while his three friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah are actually better known by their Babylonian names—Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. But Mordecai is clearly identified as a Jew. In fact, a significant amount of information about his genealogy is revealed. He was of the tribe of Benjamin, the son of Jair, grandson of Shimei, and the great-grandson of Kish, making him a descendant of King Saul, a fact that will become significant later in the story. Kish was one of those carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar over 100 years before, so Mordecai is a fourth-generation exile. This is a defining feature for Mordecai, as Esther 2:6 makes clear. The Hebrew literally reads that his ancestors "had been *exiled* from Jerusalem with the *exiles* who had been *exiled* with Jehoiachin, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar *exiled*." That doesn't make for good English but it is exactly what the Hebrew text says. Mordecai is a Jewish exile in Persia, though an exile

by choice.

Esther's orphan status, names, and beauty are highlighted. Esther is Mordecai's cousin. He adopted when her parents died. We are given no information about how they died, but she evidently was quite young because we are told she was reared by Mordecai. Esther has two names. Her Jewish name is Hadassah, which means "myrtle." Her Persian name is Esther, which may derive from Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of fertility, love and war, or from the Persian word for "star."

Her two names indicate that Esther is the daughter of two cultures, a fact that will become extremely important as the story unfolds. There will come a day when she must decide which of the two worlds is going to define her. We are also told that she is lovely in form and features. This also will become relevant in a moment.

Having introduced our hero and heroine, the author returns to the Empire-wide beauty contest. Not only does the king approve the idea; he also, according to verse 8, issues an edict to that effect. This put the force of Persian law behind the effort. We don't know how many girls were drafted for this particular branch of the civil serviceⁱⁱ—Josephus claims 400—but the relevance for our story is revealed in verse 8.

Esther is "taken" in the dragnet for beautiful young virgins. (8-16)

I think the author of our story purposely uses the word "taken" in verse 8 so as to leave some ambiguity in our minds. She did not apply for the position, but did Esther go willingly or was she forced? Did Mordecai protest or was he proud of her? We do not know, and there are few hints in the text. But we do know that. . .

She meets all the qualifications and wins the favor of the harem honcho and everyone else. You will recall from verse 2 that three qualifications were established by the Search Committee: the contestants had to be beautiful, young, and unmarried. Esther is all three. The author also makes a note of the fact that Esther pleases Hegai, the chief eunuch, and wins his favor. As a result he gives her special treatment—apparently beauty treatments and food the others don't receive. He even gives her seven maids from the palace and moves her into the penthouse of the harem.

From all appearances (and I emphasize "appearances" because the author is quite cagey about motives and attitudes) Esther has learned not only how to survive but even thrive in her new lot in life. Even if originally "taken" against her will, she seems not to waste time moping around, feeling sorry for herself, hoping against hope that she would be rejected before her audition and be able to return home. If that were the case I doubt seriously that Hegai would have tolerated her, much less favored her. Furthermore, did you notice that Esther wins "the favor of everyone who saw her" (verse 15), which sounds a lot like being chosen as Miss Congeniality by the rest of the contestants!

It's at this point that we learn one of the more disconcerting facts about Esther:

She hides her Jewishness in obedience to Mordecai. Why is this point made? I think not only because it becomes crucial to the story line but also because it gives us more insight into the spiritual condition of Mordecai, Esther, and their fellow exiles in Persia. You see, hiding her nationality and family background means more than it would for someone today to hide that they are, say Swedish. To hide her Jewishness means she is hiding her faith. She is clearly not living by the Mosaic Law, not observing the Jewish dietary restrictions, not observing the Sabbath and the feasts, for if she were, her Jewishness would be immediately apparent.

To grasp the significance of this, I want us to contrast Esther's *modus operandi* with Daniel's in Babylon 125 years earlier. Daniel 1:3-8:

"Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring in some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility—4 young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

(Skip down to verse 8). But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way."

Do you see the parallels? Do you see the differences between Daniel's behavior and Esther's? It seems to me that Esther and Mordecai have chosen a course of action designed to protect them from political and social danger, but which at the same time is fraught with spiritual danger. Daniel's action seems to be much bolder, more courageous, and much more trusting in God. Remember the children's song, *Dare to Be a Daniel?* He's definitely the kind of example we like to put before our children.

But I suggest some caution in contrasting Daniel with Esther. It's easy to point to the fact that at Daniel's boldness the Empire backed down, and he enjoyed great success, rising to the second highest position in government. But bold faith, you know, just as often leads to lions' dens and fiery furnaces as to success, and rescue is not *always* just around the corner. The 11th chapter of Hebrews, which we recently studied, contains as many martyrs as success stories.

Daniel was certainly used by God as an inspiration to the exiles in 6th century Babylon, and for 2500 years he has delivered a message of hope and courage to believers. But Esther too was used by God as an inspiration to the exiles and God used her to save His people from almost certain extermination. So while I certainly see a qualitative difference between the faith of Daniel and the faith of Esther, I think we need to be cautious about canonizing one and demonizing the other. God used them both. (And if we're going to be really honest, many of us are more like

Esther than Daniel, aren't we?)

Esther follows the rules of the competition. The rules for all the contestants are laid out clearly: twelve months of beauty treatments, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. When each girl's turn came to audition before the king, she was allowed to take anything she wanted with her from the harem to the king's palace. I assume this would include whatever seductive clothes she wanted to wear, perhaps special food she had prepared—whatever she needed to impress him. She would have one night with the king, and if he never asked for her again she would be reassigned to the harem and would spend the rest of her life there, since the king's toys could not be shared by anyone else.

According to verse 15, when Esther's turn arrives to go to the king, she doesn't pull a Lady Gaga. She doesn't show off, go for the publicity, or try to impress the king with anything external. She takes with her only what Hegai suggests. She seems to have a quiet self-confidence, willing to be herself and let her natural beauty and perhaps her beautiful personality win the day.

But this whole beauty pageant is one of the most difficult aspects of this story for us to ponder. There is simply no way to see this as anything but what it is—a pagan king, auditioning hundreds of young girls in his bed, looking for just the right one. By the way, did you notice the time frame mentioned in verse 16? “Esther was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the *seventh year* of his reign.” Do you recall the time when our story began? It was in the *third year* of his reign. During the intervening years Xerxes was off fighting a disastrous war with Greece. That's why he was willing to give these girls a year for beauty treatments.

To find our heroine involved in this sordid affair, hiding her faith, is disappointing indeed from a purely moral standpoint. But Esther not only enters the competition, agrees to play by the rules, and excels in her preparation.

Esther “wins” the contest following her one-night audition. (17-18)

I put “win” in quotation marks, because whether this is really a “win” depends upon the larger context and one's perspective.

She is crowned Queen in Vashti's place. Imagine the reaction of Esther's uncle Mordecai and her family and close friends when they learn that one of their own has been chosen Queen of the Empire? I suspect there were mixed emotions—pride, excitement, probably some foreboding for her safety, knowing the fickleness of the king, and I hope some concern for her spiritual welfare, but the author is silent on the subject.

She is honored with a banquet and a holiday. Banquets are going to be a major theme of this book. This one is called “Esther's Banquet” to honor the new Queen. Again all the nobles and officials of the empire are invited. The king also proclaims a holiday throughout the Empire and gifts are distributed. If you have an English Standard Version it says that “taxes were

remitted,” because that is a likely interpretation of the phrase “proclaim a holiday.”

Now there’s one more important event in chapter 2, but we aren’t exactly sure how it fits chronologically with the rest of the chapter. The opening phrase of verse 19 is confusing: “When the virgins were assembled a second time.” Perhaps this is a reference to some sort of celebration on the anniversary of Esther’s selection as Queen. But some scholars feel sure it means that Xerxes auditioned the girls a second time even after his marriage to Esther, and they point to the fact that in chapter 4 Esther faces a dilemma because she hasn’t seen the king for 30 days. All of this indicates that becoming Queen was probably not all glory for Esther.

Mordecai finds himself at the right place at the right time. (19-23)

Mordecai we are told is “sitting at the king’s gate.” This does not mean he is a beggar. Do you remember back to the fourth chapter of the Book of Ruth and the Drama at the City Gate? We mentioned then that the gate was essentially the ancient courthouse. Archaeologists have actually dug up a gatehouse in Susa that was approximately 13,000 square feet and probably housed the judiciary.ⁱⁱⁱ It is very likely that Mordecai is some sort of judge.

Again we are reminded that Esther has kept the secret of her Jewishness just as Mordecai had urged her. The point will become critical to the story.

He uncovers a plot to assassinate the king and reports it to Esther. Being near the seat of power, Mordecai just “happens” (quotation marks around that) to overhear some angry officers of the court conspiring to assassinate King Xerxes. He passes that information on to the Queen, who in turn pass it on to the king and gives credit to her cousin Mordecai.

Normally the king would immediately reward a person for such an act, because such rewards would encourage others to step forward with similar information. But for whatever reason the King forgets about the incident, a circumstance which will have a powerful impact on the story in chapter 6.

The conspirators are caught, impaled on a gallows, and the deed is recorded in the king’s annals. Gallows play an important role in this story, but if you’re thinking of a wooden structure from which people are hung by a rope around the neck, that may not be what is intended. The gallows of ancient Persia were a particularly gruesome structure upon which people were impaled on stakes, alive. It was more like crucifixion than hanging. At any rate, the two conspirators are executed and the incident is recorded in the annals of the king.

Now we have spent more time on the story itself this week, but I don’t want to ignore the spiritual lessons we might learn.

Consequences of a hidden faith

Without taking a dogmatic position on the reality or absence of strong faith in Esther and Mordecai, I think we can, without fear of contradiction, conclude that they have hidden whatever faith they possess. What are the consequences when faith is hidden? I would like to discuss this by means of two propositions:

1. Those who play the Empire's game often find themselves playing by the Empire's rules.

Esther, either reluctantly or willingly, went after the #1 prize the world had to offer a woman of her day—Queen of the Empire. To do so she had to eat whatever was set before her, wear the clothes that were laid out for her, focus on beauty treatments instead of spiritual growth, and even prepare to spend the night with a man she wasn't married to and who had a history of treating women as playthings. How many of your parents would set her up as an example to your daughters, or teach them a song, *Dare to be an Esther*? Certainly not at this point of her life!

Why doesn't Esther just say "no!"? Why doesn't she refuse and say, "If I perish, I perish!" *now* instead of in chapter 4? I suppose it would be easy to give a trite answer, like "if she refused, she never would have gained a position of influence to accomplish what God did through her in chapter 8." But that's really not an answer, because God could have used her earlier in the story to prevent the extermination plot He later uses her to foil. Frankly, I'm not sure I can answer my own questions.

The fact is many Christians today face similar challenges in deciding whether to play the Empire's game. From time to time a thorough-going evangelical enters politics, and a few have advanced quite high in government. I think, for example, of Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon, or Governor Al Quie of Minnesota, or Attorney General John Ashcroft. But they invariably discover how many things about politics are diametrically opposed to Christian principles. Take attack ads (those that are essentially dishonest), for example. Many experts say that it's almost impossible to win a hotly contested election without painting one's opponent in the worst possible light. Or take earmarks. The powerful interests that provide essential campaign cash always want something in return for their support. That's just how the world operates. If a candidate refuses on ethical grounds to play by those rules, he soon finds himself on the outside looking in. And, of course, God forbid that an evangelical slip up morally—the press will crucify him, even while they give pagans a pass. Those are the rules. They aren't fair, but they are the rules.

Professional sports is another arena where the prize can be significant, but once again the rules are often troubling, and the temptations huge. The Empire's game is enticing but its rules are troubling.

What is the answer? Should we refuse to engage the Empire, reject public life, retreat to our sacred ghettos? That doesn't seem to be the biblical answer, for there are many examples in the Bible of believers at the center of the culture. Do we keep our faith private? Powerful secularists in our world are more and more demanding that we do so. They keep telling us they have no problem with religious faith so long as it doesn't inform the individual's actions or attitudes, and so long as it doesn't impact public policy. But what good is a faith that doesn't inform anything,

that doesn't make a difference in a person's worldview?ⁱ

Many politicians today, from local mayors to the President, claim to be people of faith, but the claim is often cynical at best. What kind of sense does it make for a politician to claim to be a devout Catholic and yet be avidly pro-choice and pro-gay-marriage, at the very same time their church teaches that the sanctity of life and traditional marriage are essential tenets of the faith. Yet we see this all the time.

And what about the academic world? Christian professors know that many of them will never achieve tenure if they are honest about their beliefs, for true academic freedom is a joke on most campuses. Is private faith the only answer? I don't think so. There are sufficient examples of courage put forth in Scripture, and sufficient exhortations to be bold in our faith to know that God honors the Daniel route above the Esther syndrome.

At the same time, as I said before, honesty demands that many of us admit that we are more like Esther than Daniel—trying to blend in, seeking the affirmation of those around us, exercising private but genuine faith.

Which brings me to a second point for which I am very grateful, but which some of you may view as a sell-out, I don't know.

2. God is sovereign over even our sinful choices and wasted opportunities. Let me just tell you that I'm very grateful that God uses not only superstars like Daniel and Joseph and Paul, but also people like the weak strongman, Samson, Esther and Mordecai, doubting Thomas, timid Timothy, and Peter the deny-er. I'm not saying that we should not *aspire* to be Daniels or Josephs, of course not! But if we know we're not there yet, we can be consoled by the fact that we aren't automatically eliminated from being used by God.

I see hope here for people who married an unbeliever, even though they knew it was wrong. Or the one who chose a career based on all the wrong motivations. God is sovereign over even such mistakes. Perhaps he has brought us to where we are today so that we can still serve him in a unique way. Are we willing, now? The possibility that God may yet use us doesn't make our wrong decisions right, but it should cause us to give thanks to God that past failures do not write us out of a role in God's script for the future. He is able to form beautiful pictures out of smudged and stained efforts.^v

i. Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, Reformed Expository Commentary, 20.

ii. Wording borrowed from Duguid, 19.

iii. Frederic Bush, *Esther/Ruth*, Word Biblical Commentary, 373.

iv. I can almost guarantee you that within a very few years, should the Lord tarry, churches in the United States are going to be faced with sanctions if they refuse to marry gays and lesbians or refuse to hire them on church staffs. It's already happening in European countries, and usually we're only a decade or so behind Europe when it comes to depravity.

v. Duguid, 29.