

## May 30, 2021 | Esther: Fractured People Flawless God

### Week 3 | Esther 2 | “Unbreakable Family Bonds”

Last week we continued our study through the book of Esther. We learned several things, but prime amongst them is the King's love for wine and women. This characterization is amplified even further in the following chapter, where the king chooses his next queen based on her looks and ability to please him and then celebrates with yet another (3<sup>rd</sup>) feast.

Fair warning, today's discussion will brush up against topics that parents of younger listeners may not want them to hear just yet. This is not to say we'll be improper or explicit in our discussion; however, the text demands we address some of the more shameful aspects of Persian aristocracy. As I've said many times before, the Bible isn't a children's book. It deals with adult people in adult situations. If Esther were ever made into the kind of movie that sought, above all else, to be faithful to its source material, it would be given a PG-13 (or higher) rating by the Motion Picture Association.

Now, with that out of the way, let's dive into the text.

#### **READ:** Esther 2:1-4 (ESV)

<sup>1</sup>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. <sup>2</sup>Then the king's young men who attended him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. <sup>3</sup>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. <sup>4</sup>And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” This pleased the king, and he did so.

So, here we find Xerxes after the events of Chapter 1. How long after? Given that this is the first thing we read in Chapter 2, the narrator seems to imply this was very soon after, possibly even the following day.<sup>1</sup> Having slept off the booze, Xerxes got out of bed, sat down at breakfast, had himself a cup of coffee, and only then did he remember what he had done the night before. Verse one is colored with regret.<sup>2</sup> Xerxes must've thought to himself, “What have I done?”

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<sup>1</sup> Clines, David J., *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, The New Century Bible Commentary, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. 284.

<sup>2</sup> Bush, Frederic, *Ruth-Esther*, The Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 9, (Grand Rapids; Zondervan, 1996), p. 367.

Now, an honorable man would've called his wife and apologized and would then try to make it right. Instead, we find Xerxes do nothing. Even though he felt guilty over what he did, even though he probably wished someone should've stopped him, he doesn't take responsibility for his actions. It's up to his attendants, once again, to make the decision for him. Their solution? Get another wife. And while he's at it, he might as well make it a nationwide beauty pageant where only the prettiest gain entry. Because nothing screams, "I'm moving on!" quite like a long string of one-night stands. And, sad to say, it is under these circumstances that our heroes finally take the stage.

**READ:** Esther 2:5-11 (ESV)

<sup>5</sup> 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, <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> 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. <sup>8</sup> 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.

<sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. <sup>11</sup> And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Here the comedic overtones, which have been with us from the beginning, have to be placed on pause. While Xerxes and his court were introduced to us as drunken fools who wielded their power under the influence of wine and whimsy, Mordecai and Esther are presented to us as tragic figures who are far from home and thrust into a lousy situation outside of their control.

We're told three things about Mordecai:

First, before we're even given his actual name, Mordecai is presented to us as "a Jew." Word order may not be important in English, but it is in Hebrew.<sup>3</sup> What does word order have to do with the story? As we said in the first lesson in this series, rather than being attached to a specific region in Israel, as is typical in the OT, Mordecai is known simply as the "Jew;" a moniker that designates both his religious faith and geographic region.

Secondly, while he's known in the region as "a Jew," Mordecai's lineage is still mentioned: "son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite..." This places Mordecai and Esther in the royal bloodline of Israel and a descendant of Saul (cf. 1 Sam. 9:1; 14:51; 1 Chron. 8:33). As we pointed out in the introductory portion of this series, this has important implications for the villain of our story, Haman. But we'll save that discussion till later.

Lastly, Mordecai raised his cousin, Esther, as if she were his own daughter. We're never told whether or not Mordecai was married or had his own children. Thus, it seems, in Mordecai, we have a good man who would've been alone in life if "fate" had not given him a baby girl to care for and love. Even in the first few sentences, we see that Mordecai cares more for his own family than Xerxes ever did.

We're told four things about Esther:

First, she's an orphan. We're not told how her parents died, only that she was lucky enough to have a good, godly cousin to take care of her. Who knows what would've happened to an orphaned Israelite girl in the capital of the largest, most powerful nation on the planet—a country known for its cruelty—had Mordecai not stepped in.

Secondly, while known as Esther, her Hebrew name was Hadassah. "Esther" is probably derived from the Persian word meaning "star," and "Hadassah" is taken from the Hebrew word meaning "myrtle."<sup>4</sup> The myrtle bush is a luscious green plant with beautiful star-shaped white flowers that emit a pleasing fragrance.<sup>5</sup> It is used in the OT to symbolize God's forgiveness of his people when man uproots the briars and thrones of his own disobedience (cf. Isa. 41:19; 55:13; Zech. 1:8).<sup>6</sup> Though many commentators

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<sup>3</sup> Reid, Debra, *Esther*, The Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Volume 13, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2008), p. 78.

<sup>4</sup> Firth, David G., *The Message of Esther*, The Bible Speaks Today, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press Academic, 2010), p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> "Myrtle," *The Jewish Virtual Library*, A Project of Aice, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/myrtle>, [accessed, May 29, 2021].

<sup>6</sup> Baldwin, Joyce G., *Esther: An Introduction & Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, (Downers Grove, ILL; InterVarsity Press, 1984), p. 66.

have tried to connect the meaning of Esther's name with her story, the results have been inconclusive.<sup>7</sup> Knowing the meaning behind her name adds very little to the story.

Thirdly, Esther was beautiful. And not just your average, run-of-the-mill, beautiful, but **very** beautiful. We know this because here beauty is commented on twice, "The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at..." Now, interestingly, beauty is a trait many people desire. Who wouldn't want to be beautiful? However, Esther's beauty will be shown as her curse. Many girls probably wished they were thought of as "ugly" to be overlooked for this particular beauty pageant, especially considering the implications that go with it if they end up **not** being chosen.

Lastly, we're told that Esther **didn't earn** her way into this pageant; she was "taken." This is the same word used to describe the deportation of the Israelites by the Babylonians in 605BC.<sup>8</sup> This makes Esther a type for all her people who were likewise taken from their homeland and forced to live in countries that did not know God. Why is this such an essential fact to our story? Because when Esther is placed in compromising situations, we must remember that all that happens to her happens **without** her consent. As we'll read, the process that made her queen is cruel and immoral, and she did not choose to be queen. She is nothing more than a piece of meat to Xerxes. What he called "love" any of us would've called "lust." She had no choice in her life. Her parents were taken from her, and whatever life she had planned for herself before this vile decree was taken from her as well. Her sad state is heightened even more when we realize that the king wanted "virgins," or girls of marriageable age.<sup>9</sup> This would've made her at best a girl in her late teens, or, at worst, as young as 13.

What's truly remarkable about Esther is that instead of growing bitter about her lot in life and despite the odds against her, she will make the best out of a bad situation. She knows that God's providence does not mean he will always prevent suffering. Esther is the personification of Randy Pausch's famous quote, "We cannot change the cards we are dealt, just how we play the hand." As we'll see in the coming paragraphs, Esther was dealt a bad hand from a rigged deck, yet she took the life that was given to her and chose to honor God. And because of that, God allowed favor to follow her. Everyone who met Esther instantly fell for Esther. Was that because of Esther's charm and beauty? Sure. That's part of it. But Esther had someone in her corner that the other girls didn't: God. Only God's veiled interference can explain Esther's

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<sup>7</sup> Bush (1996), p. 363.

<sup>8</sup> Reid (2008), p. 80.

<sup>9</sup> Bush (1996), p. 361.

skyrocket to the seat of the queen. And because of a teenage girl's faithfulness, her people will be saved.

**READ: Esther 2:12-18 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> 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— <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.

A couple of observations:

The process by which the next queen would be chosen was twofold: her beauty and her ability to please the king in bed. It is sickening. But putting aside the moral judgments for a moment. According to historians, the queen of Persian was supposed to come from one of the seven royal households.<sup>10</sup> Thus, even the selection of a new queen, as portrayed in Esther, which should've been governed by tradition and rules, was based on nothing more than some nameless woman's appearance and a one-night stand.

Esther didn't become queen until four years after the initial edict. That means Esther has been waiting her turn that entire time. Her life had been effectively put on hold, and she would not learn her fate until four years after. And what of the girls whose names weren't called? They

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<sup>10</sup> Bush (1996), p. 369.

were placed in the care of the King as one of many concubines. A depressing fate for many of the brightest and most beautiful women in Persia. Instead of being sent back home to their families and, hopefully, being able to raise a family of their own, they would have to spend the rest of their days as slaves to one man's appetite.

**READ:** Esther 2:19-23 (ESV)

<sup>19</sup> Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. <sup>20</sup> Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. <sup>21</sup> In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. <sup>22</sup> And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. <sup>23</sup> When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

This scene sets up what will follow. And I only mention it briefly because there are only two things we're supposed to glean from the short scene: first, Mordecai is some sort of royal official given that he sits at the "kings gate," a term meaning the place where the actual governing of the land took place; second, Esther has the ear of the King. He loved her before because of her beauty, and he will love her even more now that she's helped save his life.

**So, what's the takeaway?**

Love for our own proves we are God's own.

**READ:** John 13:34-35 (ESV)

<sup>34</sup> A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Mordecai loved Esther as if she was his own daughter. When she was taken from him, Mordecai did not abandon Esther to the appetites of evil men but visited her every day for four years to see how she was doing. And when he learned about a threat upon the king's life, do you think he reported it to save Xerxes? No, He did it because he was concerned for the life of his one and only adoptive daughter, a girl known to all as "Esther" but to him as "Hadassah." If they would've killed him, they certainly would've gone after his new bride. Esther was family, and

Mordecai cared for her when family bonds meant very little (cf. Esth. 1). Love for the brotherhood—for the household of faith—proves to the world that we are God's.

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## VIDEO DESCRIPTION

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Pastor's manuscript can be found here: <https://docdro.id/wHMuzUo>