

"A 'BETTER' QUEEN FOR PERSIA"

**I. Introduction**

- A. We saw last week how chapter 1 of Esther sets the stage for what follows in the remainder of the book.
1. Ahasuerus was introduced as a great king over a great empire.
  2. At the same time, the events that unfolded in that chapter presented the king and his court in an unimpressive light.
  3. Ahasuerus tried to put his wife, Queen Vashti, on display at a feast, but she embarrassed him by refusing to obey his summons.
  4. This caused Ahasuerus' advisors to worry that their own wives would follow suit and disregard their authority.
  5. So they counseled the king to depose Vashti and give her royal position "to another who is better than she."
- B. In chapter 2, we learn the identity of this "better" queen.
1. It is Esther, a beautiful Jewish virgin.
  2. The thing that made Esther better than Vashti was that she responded to the king and his courtiers in the way that they wanted her to respond.
  3. She was compliant, eager to please.
  4. This is not always an admirable quality.
  5. As is often the case in historical narratives, the writer does not comment on the morality of the actions of Esther and Mordecai.

6. But when we evaluate their actions in light of what is said elsewhere in the Old Testament, it becomes clear that they were acting contrary to God's revealed will.
7. Nevertheless, the Lord continued to govern all that was taking place by his invisible hand.
8. He even worked through people who were not seeking to carry out his will.
9. He used Esther's and Mordecai's decisions to ensure that his covenant people would be protected from threat of annihilation.

## II. A Royal Beauty Contest

- A. The passage opens with Ahasuerus regretting his hasty decision to depose his beautiful wife Vashti.
  1. His attendants pick up on this, and they advise him to find a new wife.
  2. In Persia, when the king wants to find a new mate, he doesn't have to start hanging out in bars or ask his friends to set him up with someone or join an internet dating site.
  3. Instead, he simply issues an order for his officers to round up all of the beautiful virgins in the kingdom and bring them to his harem in Susa.
  4. Then, after undergoing a long series of beauty treatments, each girl would be given an opportunity to convince the king that she should be the next queen.
  5. It was a royal beauty contest, and the prize was the crown that had been taken away from Vashti.
- B. This may sound glamorous, and in a certain way it was, but there was also a dark side to it.

1. These girls were being removed from their families, their homes, and their communities.
  2. They probably had no say in the matter.
  3. If the king's officials picked them, that was pretty much it.
  4. On top of that, they did not get to go back home if they were not the one chosen by the king.
  5. Like many cultures, including our own, Persia had no problem exploiting and using women.
- C. This brings us to the next part of the passage, where we are introduced to Mordecai and Esther.
1. Mordecai is identified by his Persian name rather than his Hebrew name.
  2. The name Mordecai was a name that was derived from the name of the Babylonian god Marduk.
  3. It was common for Jewish exiles to be given these kinds of names, as we see in the book of Daniel.
  4. At the same time, there were significant differences between how Daniel and his friends conducted themselves in their exile context and how Mordecai and Esther conducted themselves in Persia.
- D. We are also told that Mordecai was a descendant of Kish, the father of King Saul, which meant that he was from the tribe of Benjamin.
1. This piece of information will have significance later on in the book when we come to Mordecai's conflict with Haman.
  2. This information about Mordecai's ancestry also suggests that he may have been a member of the Jewish nobility, which would explain why his family was taken into captivity by the Babylonians.

- E. The question that arises about Mordecai at this point is why he and his family didn't return to Palestine under Cyrus' decree.
1. Perhaps he had gotten comfortable living in Susa.
  2. Perhaps he enjoyed some of the benefits of living in the most important city in the empire.
  3. Whatever the reason, the fact that he remained in Persia meant that he was faced with a considerable amount of pressure to blend into his surrounding culture.
  4. And that, as we will see in a few moments, is exactly what he did.
- F. When the writer introduces Esther, he identifies her by both her Hebrew name, Hadassah, and her Persian name, Esther.
1. The name Esther was derived from the name of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar.
  2. Esther was Mordecai's cousin by blood, but when she was orphaned he took her in and raised her as his own daughter.
  3. Our passage says that Esther was a young woman who "had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at."
  4. In other words, she fit the criteria that the king's officers were using to identify who to take into the royal harem: she was young, beautiful, and unmarried.
  5. In light of this, it comes as no surprise that Esther was taken into the king's palace.
  6. It was inevitable.
  7. The king's officials might not have been all that thorough about collecting every single beautiful virgin in the other

parts of the empire, but you can be sure that they would give all due diligence to their task there in Susa.

8. This makes Mordecai's decision to remain in Susa all the more questionable.
9. In Susa, there would be no hope of protecting Esther if the king decided to add to his harem.

### III. The Triumph of Esther

- A. The text tells us that Esther was "taken into the king's palace."
  1. As we noted earlier, she probably had no choice in the matter.
  2. Still, she and Mordecai could have protested.
  3. They could have said that their religion forbade them from intermarrying with those who worship other gods. (see Deut. 7:3-4)
  4. The fact that they did not do this tells us that they were not willing to face the consequences that could have resulted from such resistance.
- B. Another troubling fact is that once Esther was in the harem, she went along with the process with eager compliance, so much so that she made an impression upon those who had charge of her.
  1. In other words, she rose to the top because she knew how to please people.
  2. This is underscored by the writer's repeated use of the phrase "won favor" to describe Esther's interactions with those in the royal court.
  3. This is an unusual phrase in Hebrew.

4. Typically, a person is said to have “found favor” in someone else’s sight.
  5. But here, Esther wins people’s favor by doing exactly what they want her to do.
- C. Esther’s actions stand in sharp contrast to the actions of the young men who were taken into the king’s service in the book of Daniel.
1. While Daniel and his friends were respectful to the authorities and served diligently, they refused to compromise their faith.
  2. When the king sent them luxurious food from his table, they were guarded themselves against being enticed by the fineries of Babylonian culture.
  3. They respectfully asked to be allowed to maintain a more simple diet.
  4. They were taking a big risk by making that request, but the book of Daniel tells us that “God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.” (Dan. 1:9)
  5. Notice the contrast with Esther: God *gave* Daniel favor, but Esther *won* favor.
  6. This does not put her in a positive light.
- D. The writer also tells us about the extensive beauty treatments that these young women received.
1. These treatments took twelve months to complete, another detail that emphasizes the luxury of the Persian court.
  2. Perhaps these girls liked having the opportunity to enhance their beauty.

3. Perhaps they enjoyed the good food that they were fed in order to fatten them up before they were sent to the king.
  4. But they paid quite a price for this opportunity, and the odds were stacked against them.
  5. There were a lot of girls in the king's harem.
  6. One estimate suggests that there were over 1,400.
  7. And those who were not chosen to replace Vashti were not sent back to their families.
  8. When a girl was summoned to the king's palace to spend the night with him, she became one of his concubines, the official mistresses of the king.
  9. She would be kept and provided for, but she would not have the status or affection of a wife.
  10. Listen to how one commentator describes what this would have been like: "for the majority what awaited them was more like widowhood than marriage. Though each girl in turn moved from the house of Hegai to that of Shaashgaz once she had become a concubine, there was no guarantee that the king would remember her by name and call for her even once more. Quite apart from the emotional deprivation this entailed, were not young men in their villages deprived of wives by the king's greed? The prestige of living in the royal palace was small compensation for the king's neglect, though girls with a passion for luxury could no doubt indulge it to the full." [Baldwin, 67-8]
- E. When Esther's turn to go to the king came up, she made the most of her opportunity.
1. The king was well pleased with her.
  2. Here was a woman who was indeed better than Vashti.

3. She was like Vashti as far as her looks were concerned, but she was the exact opposite of Vashti in the most important respect.
4. Vashti had embarrassed the king by defying him, but Esther focused all of her energies upon pleasing the king.
5. Thus, she won his favor and became the next queen.

#### **IV. Mordecai Saves the King**

- A. The last part of our passage begins by telling us that Esther continued to keep her Jewish identity a secret, even after she was made queen.
  1. She did this because it was what Mordecai instructed her to do.
  2. Why would he want her to do this?
  3. Perhaps there was an undercurrent of anti-Semitism in the empire, but even if this was the case, it does not seem to have put the Jews in any danger at this point.
  4. Probably the worst thing that could have happened would have been that Esther was not chosen to be queen.
  5. Mordecai wanted her to be queen.
  6. He wanted her to suppress her identity as one of God's covenant people in order to give her a better chance at advancing in the world.
  7. And it worked.
  8. Esther rose to the top.
- B. God's people experience the same temptation today.

1. We are sometimes tempted to keep quiet about our Christian identity when we sense that it might put us at a disadvantage.
  2. But when we give in to that line of thinking, we are forgetting that we owe our ultimate loyalty to Christ.
  3. We are losing sight of the fact that worldly advancement and success are simply not worth comparing to being a member of God's kingdom.
- C. The chapter ends by telling us how Mordecai discovered a plot and saved the king's life.
1. The writer says that Mordecai was sitting in his position at the king's gate, a position that he may very well have obtained through Esther's influence.
  2. And while he was sitting there, he overheard two of the king's eunuchs plotting against the king.
  3. Mordecai just happened to be in the right place at the right time, a theme that will come up repeatedly in this book.
  4. This is one of the ways in which the writer clues us in to the fact that God's invisible hand was guiding all of these events.
  5. These things did not happen by mere chance.
  6. They happened by God's design.
- D. When Mordecai reported what he had heard, the matter was investigated and the two eunuchs were put to death.
1. One would think that Mordecai would have been richly rewarded by the king for what he had done, but that didn't happen.

2. The writer tells us that this “was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king,” but for the time being Mordecai was forgotten by the king.
3. This too was according to God’s plan.
4. It sets stage for what will take place later on in the book.

## V. Conclusion

- A. In this chapter, we see Esther and Mordecai compromising their faith in some significant ways.
  1. Their desire for advancement in Persia was a higher priority to them than maintaining their distinct identity as God’s covenant people.
  2. This was a serious failure on their part, but it did not disqualify them from being used by God.
  3. In fact, the very decisions that they made for worldly motives were used by God to put them in a position in which they could serve him in a unique way.
  4. This does not excuse their sin, but it shows us that God’s sovereignty extends even over the sins that his people commit.
- B. We all fail our Lord in many, many ways.
  1. We too are prone to put our desire for worldly advancement and success ahead of our loyalty to Christ and our commitment to the advance of Christ’s kingdom.
  2. We too are inclined to try to win favor by focusing on pleasing men.
  3. These are not good things.

4. But the story of Esther shows us that God is not hindered by our failures.
5. It shows us that past disobedience does not mean that we will not be given opportunities to serve the Lord in the future.
6. Let us be thankful for the great patience and mercy that our heavenly Father extends to us in his Son.
7. Let us repent of our compromising efforts to obtain advancement in this world.
8. And let us strive, in grateful reliance upon Christ, to put our loyalty to him above everything else.