

Dare To Be An Esther

Esther 2

Most of us have heard of the phrase, “Dare to be Daniel!”

We may have even sung the hymn.

Daniel is an example of purity in the midst of corruption.

Daniel maintains his faith in terribly trying circumstances.

He would rather die than compromise his faith in God.

He chooses to not eat the king’s food, but rather maintain the dietary regulations of the Mosaic law.

He openly prays three times a day to Yahweh.

He is unbending in his faith even in the face of being thrown to the lions.

Daniel is a man that inspires us!

It is a good prayer to ask that God would give you a faith like Daniel’s faith.

You may even pray this prayer for your children.

But this sermon is not about Daniel.

This sermon is about Esther.

And as far as I know, there are no songs called, “Dare to be an Esther!”

There will come a moment in Esther’s life where she will be called by God to risk everything to stand with God’s people. And in this moment does possess a bold faith that is truly commendable and Daniel-like.

But we are not there yet. And Esther’s life, at this point, makes us very uncomfortable.

“We would hardly coin the slogan ‘Dare to be an Esther’ at this point in the story” (Ian Duguid).

Esther will disappoint us in this chapter.

But even though Esther will disappoint us, if you will follow along, I think you will find that her disappointments become the soil from which you and I can find great encouragement and hope.

Much has happened between chapter 1 and chapter 2.

If you remember, King Ahasuerus, (Xerxes) had a six month party/war council capped off by a 7 day celebration, that his wife the Queen - Vashti - shot all to pieces by not coming when she was called.

Short story, Vashti was forever banned from Xerxes presence.

Chapter 2 begins with these words:

^{ESV} **Esther 2:1**

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.

Now, if you did not know any better, you would think that 2 weeks had gone by between chapter 1 and chapter 2. The King cools off after a few days. But this is not the case. You see, Xerxes was planning for war with the Greeks. And he does go to war. And he is gone for some 3 years or more.

How do we know this?

In chapter 1 we are told that the story begins in the 3rd year of Xerxes reign. In chapter 2 v. 16 we are told that it is the 7th year of Xerxes reign.

You see, Xerxes went off to war and was defeated by the Greeks. He was embarrassed by the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae and then his fleet was wiped out by the Greek fleet at Salamis. What I find truly fascinating is that if you were to study your secular history books they would tell you many details about the two events I just mentioned, but they would not tell you about Esther.

But when God tells you his version of the story, he leaves out entirely the war with Greece. I am sure that there were great works from the hand of God's providence there as well. But God is focused on the history of his people.

You are far more important to God than what happens in world affairs. We sometimes get all impressed with the powers and pomp of this world. God is not impressed. What God takes interest in is the welfare of his people. This is what consumes him. This is what delights him. He will move kings and mountains for the sake of his people.

God cares about his people. God cares about the Church and its mission to seek out the lost and bring them into its fold. God is preparing a Bride for his beloved Son. This is the history that God cares about.

Xerxes comes home from war. He is now thinking again about the fact that he has banished his queen from his presence. It is most likely that Vashti, even though she is now banned from his presence, has born his child. But Xerxes wants a new bride that he can have at his side. He doesn't want any old bride. He wants to make sure that he finds the fairest maiden of them all. And he does not have a mirror to tell him who that is.

² Then the king's young men who attended him said,
"Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king."

3 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
capital,
under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge
of the women.
Let their cosmetics be given them.

4 And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of
Vashti."
This pleased the king,
and he did so.

There is much that we are not told in these verses that we might like to know.
We do not know how many were chosen.
We don't know the process as to how the king's men determined who were the
most beautiful.
We don't know how forcefully the women were pressed into the king's service.
Was this an honor? Or was it something that was despicable to them.
Some have been repulsed by the treatment of women in this story. I agree that
it was terrible.
But before we get on a crusade against the men who oppress the women, let
me also tell you that it was the normal practice of the Persian kings to press
500 young men into their service each year and to make them eunuchs in the
process. Rather than simply being a wickedness against women, what we see
displayed here is the wickedness of a powerful and ungodly king.

The plan is to find a large number of beautiful women, and after giving them
beauty treatments for one year, they are to each have their encounter with the
king. We are not told the details of these encounters, but I can tell you that
the king did not have a chaperone.

The point for us as readers is that it seems impossible that God could be
working to preserve his people in such an environment of sin and corruption.

5 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,
6 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.
7 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.

It is halfway through the second chapter of the book of Esther that we are finally introduced to the main players in the story of God preserving his people.

We are first introduced to Mordecai. We are not told much about Mordecai, only what the author deems as truly important for us to know.

He was a Jew, and as such he was a member of God's covenant people. But as a Jew, Mordecai is living in Susa, in the citadel of King Xerxes. This carries some significance. Mordecai is NOT living in the Promised Land. He is not dwelling with the people of God who re-entered the Land that we studied about in the book of Ezra.

It would be easy to think that Mordecai, because he is not with the rest of God's people, because he is scattered among the nations, that he is no longer important to God. Maybe God has forgotten those of his people who are scattered in otherwise ungodly places.

I think that there is a connection to those of you who are working in ungodly work environments. You may be asking whether or not God is concerned about you in your workplace. Yes, God is concerned with the affairs of Faith Church, but what about me in my secular and often ungodly workplace throughout the week?

You have much in common with Mordecai. And yes, God is working in you and through you to accomplish his purposes in your various spheres of influence.

The writer goes on to tell us a very loose lineage of Mordecai. When the writers of the OT use the phrase "son of" it does not always have to mean one generation. You and I are sons of Abraham. The point in this lineage is to place Mordecai as a son of Kish, a Benjamite. There is another important figure in Jewish history who was a Benjamite. Do you know who it was? King Saul.

Now Saul is not one of the heroes among God's people. Again, we should think of Mordecai having a questionable lineage at best. Is it possible for one who has such a questionable history to be used of God in great ways?

And lastly, we are told that Mordecai is of the people who had been carried away with the captives in the exile. Again, this does not have to mean that Mordecai actually lived in Jerusalem for a season before the captivity. That would make him over 100 years old. But the writer is making sure that we know that Mordecai belongs to the Exiled community of God.

The point being that God is continuing to care for his people even when they are being chastised by him in the Exile. In fact, God had lifted his curse and brought his people back into the land. So, the question would be, if you were not one of those returnees, had God forgotten you. The resounding answer is “NO”. Mordecai is not forgotten by his God.

The second main character in the story is Esther - or as she is first introduced: Hadassah.

- meaning: Myrtle.

There are only a couple of details that we are told about Hadassah.

The first is that she was beautiful. There is no getting around this. If she were not beautiful, then she would not be in this story. Even though the Bible is far more concerned with inner beauty than external beauty, for the purposes of this story, it is important that she is extremely beautiful physically.

Again, notice that the Bible is not seeking to seduce us by this information. We are just given the relevant facts to the story.

But other than her beauty, what are we told about Hadassah?

We are told that she was living with Mordecai, but she was not really Mordecai's daughter. For some reason, I used to have the impression that Mordecai was Esther's uncle. But that is not what the text says. Esther's father was the uncle of Mordecai. That would make Esther and Mordecai cousins. And there must have been a considerable age difference because Mordecai raises or at least cares for Esther as his own daughter.

The importance of this is that the losing of your parents and being brought to live with your cousin is not the ideal. These would have been great trials for Esther. They would have certainly caused Esther to question whether or not she and her family were under God's blessing. It would have been easy to think that God was either angry with them or had simply forgotten them.

Those of us who are reading the story know that nothing could be further from the truth.

The same is true in your life as well.

We can relate to Esther's dilemma. How many of us clearly made known our faith in the Lord Jesus when we were applying for our job? By not mentioning our faith, are we compromising our faith? We are not outright denying our Lord, but we might be setting ourselves up for a later confrontation.

Esther kept her faith hidden, at least for a season.

Many of us do the same thing.

I have a general principle that I seek to follow. Any time I begin developing a new relationship in whatever the situation, I want to make known my faith in Jesus as soon as possible. I find that the longer I wait, the more difficult it becomes.

Esther did not think much of my principle. Neither did Mordecai.

Esther and Mordecai choose to hide their faith.

What would have happened had they chosen to stand strong like Daniel and his friends?

We don't know.

But I believe that by hiding their faith, they compromised their faith.

The point of the book of Esther is not so much to set Esther or Mordecai up as models of perfection. They fail us in chapter 2. But in their failure we can identify with them. How often have we remained silent about our faith? How often have we not made clear to those around us that we are believers in Jesus Christ?

Esther's silence will result in her being brought into sinful situations. But the question to ask is, "If I find myself to have compromised my faith, is all lost? Has my window of opportunity to serve God passed me by?"

The answer is "no".

God's sovereignty is such that even our past compromises will be used to further his plan for his people.

Are you not thankful that God is not dependent upon the perfect obedience of his people to bring his will to pass? I can assure you that if God was dependent upon my perfection, he would be a frustrated God. And we know that God is not frustrated. God will have a people for himself and he will use even the failures of his people in this process.

¹² 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-

¹³ 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.

¹⁴ 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.

It is difficult to imagine spending one year to get ready for one night. How can we not ask what went through the heart and mind of Esther during this year? But this is not what interests the writer. He is more concerned with the utter unlikelihood that Esther would rise to such an occasion than her inner feelings. The process was simple clear, even though it is rightly repulsive to us as believers. Hegai's job was to find the most beautiful of women and to make them even more beautiful. And then they are scheduled to have one night with the king. We must remember that Xerxes, King Ahasuerus, was a pagan king. This entire process is wicked and revolting.

Be careful if you watch a Hollywood version of this, that you don't assume that Esther's encounter with the king was purely platonic or even involved true love.

Assumedly, after the King had gone through the entire list of virgins, they would then go to another place in the palace. Here these women would have been taken care of. They would have lived a life of comfort and seclusion, but otherwise a dull and pointless existence. They would live out their days this way, unless the King might happen to remember their name and desire to have them return to him at some later time. Or in this case, to be elevated to the position of queen.

What was the purpose of taking one item with them?
Was it to have one thing to distinguish them from other women in the king's presence?
Or was it to have one personal item to keep with them after their night with the king?
Again, we are not sure.

15 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.

16 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,
17 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.

Esther's turn arrives.

In an account where virtually nothing is told to us about the personal feelings of Esther at this time, we are told again something about Esther: who she is.

She is the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter.

Who Esther is, a Jew, is more important than her personal feelings. God has one of his people going into the presence of the king. In many ways we are revolted, and rightly so, but we must also see the utter unlikelihood that this situation is taking place.

This really is an extraordinary situation. But God is no less in control of your life.

The fact that you are sitting in this building at this time is due to the working of God's providence. It really doesn't matter how you got here. Some of you are here because you are hungry to know God. Some of you are here because your parents told you to come. Some of you are here because you think that coming to Church might fix some other area of your life. You may have just showed up. Maybe you hope that someone will simply take interest in your life. I don't know. But I do know that you are here because God brought you here. It was not an accident.

The same is true about your place of work, your place of residence, the friends that you have. Everything about your life is under the sovereign hand of God.

Acts 17:24-28 ²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, ²⁵ nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. ²⁶ And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, ²⁷ that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us, ²⁸ for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, " For we are indeed his offspring.'

You may not ever be brought into the presence of the king, but your life is no less ordained by the will of God. You may not understand God's hand. It may involve all sorts of forces that do not seem to be holy. But the Scripture is clear: You are here at this moment according to God's plan and work.

What is interesting in the text is that Esther does seem to make choices that indicate that she hopes to gain the king's favor. She listens to the advice of Hegai and chooses only what he recommends to take into her meeting with the king.

We are told that Esther was winning favor with everyone that she encountered. This sounds very similar to Joseph when he is continually winning the favor of those around him after being thrown into slavery. But with Joseph, he maintains his integrity. He refuses to lie with Potiphar's wife. Here, all of the favor that Esther is winning continues to push her closer and closer to a one night stand with the king of Persia.

It is difficult to see how this is good.
How can a good God have any part of this and remain unstained?

Even though we don't really know how to respond, certainly not in rejoicing, the unbelievable happens.

The daughter of Abahail, wins the favor of the king.

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.

Again, it would be reading into the text to assume that the King of Persia has had a conversion of sorts and now is a man of fidelity to one woman.

What we do know is that Esther has won the beauty contest. She has won the prize that we are not so sure that we wanted her to win. She has “pleased” the king more than all of the other virgins.

Again, we are wondering, “To what purpose has this happened?”

Has Esther been elevated “by God” to this position, just so she can wear a crown?

Was this crown worth losing her purity?

Would it not have been better that she died?

The pagan queen Vashti resisted the will of the king.

“At this point in the story, Esther is certainly no Daniel. She is both in the world and of the world, fully complying with the empire’s outrageous demands with the goal of winning the “love” of an unworthy royal husband” (Duguid).

I repeat to you, Esther is no Daniel at this point in the story.

By all Jewish standards, she has left her faith.

One decision led to another and now she finds herself deeper in the world than she ever expected.

How would you feel at this point?

Maybe I can make it more personal to you. What if through one small compromise after another you find yourself married to an unbeliever?

You know that being so married was wrong.

Your spouse does not love the Lord.

What do you do?

You can regret the decisions that brought you to where you are, but you cannot go back.

We can and should find fault with many of the decisions that have brought Esther to where she is, but it does not change her situation.

It would be easy to think that life is hopeless. It would be easy to think that God’s purpose for Esther has passed her by.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

18 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.

At this point, we see that Esther is given personal honor. But we still have no indication of how she feels about this honor.

The king's happiness over finding a queen also spills over to cause him to give free parking to all of the provinces. They are given a reprieve from their normal taxes. And they even get a rebate from the king. But would not the king have done these things if some other woman was chosen other than Esther? What does Esther being chosen have to do with God's plan for his people?

19 Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time,
Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.

20 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.

Look closely at verse 19. It has confused commentators and I am no exception. The writer is laying out for us some time indicators. The second is fairly simple. Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. What this means is that Mordecai was given a position in the Persian government. He was not just a beggar sitting at the gate. He had some political function himself. The gate was a large building. If archaeology is correct, this particular gate/building was 131 ft. by 92 ft. Nothing is given to us as to Mordecai's particular job or how he actually acquired the job. But he has it. And it is assumed that since he did not want Esther to reveal herself as a Jew, neither did he reveal himself.

The point is that both Esther and Mordecai are now working for the Persians.

But the other time indicator is not so plain. We are told that it was the second time that the virgins were gathered. The obvious reference is to the first time that the virgins were gathered when Esther was among them. The problem is that we are not told why they were gathered. It does not seem that they are being gathered for the king to acquire a new queen. Esther is still clearly the queen.

The only conclusion that makes sense to me is that King Ahasuerus was simply wanting more concubines and since this procedure worked so well to find a queen, he is using it again. The only reason I can figure that the writer wants

us to know this is to help us see that although King Xerxes has chosen Esther, he has not really had a change of heart such that he truly feels a covenant love for her. This will be important when Esther comes to revealing herself because she truly knows that the favor of the king could leave her at any time.

So, the situation is that both Esther and Mordecai are in important positions, but neither has stood firm in their faith or been open about it. They continue to have some fear of being found out and angering the king.

21 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.
22 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.
23 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.

As Mordecai is doing his job, he overhears a plot against the king. Two of the king's eunuchs were planning to assassinate him. He alerts Esther to the plot and Esther passes it on to the king. The king is able to hang on the gallows the two, would be, assassins.

All of this was recorded. But rather than returning the favor, as was the common practice in those days, Mordecai seems to be forgotten. On the one hand Esther seems to be riding on the escalator while Mordecai has been forgotten entirely. We ought to be asking, "Why would God allow Mordecai to uncover this plot if it wasn't going to do him any good?"

We too struggle to understand the ways of God's providence. There is no possible way in the moment that Mordecai could have known why this whole event occurred.

Conclusions:

1. Esther and Mordecai have compromised their faith. They have not been a Daniel.
2. Their compromises have them not only in the world but of it.
3. Such compromises must be repented of.

4. We must not deny Jesus before men, but openly proclaim our faith in Christ.
 - a. This moment has not happened yet for Esther and Mordecai.
5. Even our past compromises are ordained by God to carry out his sovereign will.

“Here is hope for all those who find themselves in difficult circumstances in the present because of their past sin and compromise. Here is hope for people who married a non-Christian husband or wife, even though they knew it was wrong. The person who chose a career based on all of the wrong motivations, or who has wasted a lifetime in pursuit of the wrong goals can discover that God is sovereign even over those sinful choices and wasted opportunities.”

We won't sing songs about Esther from chapter 2, but we can sing songs about God's powerful and gracious hand to bring his people back to himself and to continue using them in his grand plan.

The wrong decisions are not somehow lessened. But how precious is the truth that God can continue to use you in his grand plan of redemption?

God is great. God is good. He is truly wonderful. Be encouraged in your life.