

Favor in the Eyes of All
Esther 2:1-18
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CenterPoint Church

Read Esther 2:1-18

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."
(Hebrews 4:12)

Introduction

I'm not going to ask for a show of hands of who watches the shows, *The Bachelor* or *The Bachelorette*, you can confess that privately to the Lord. I'm sure that you know the setup of *The Bachelor*: a single man is chosen to date twenty-five eligible young ladies over the course of six weeks, narrowing down his choice to one by the end. He dismisses a certain number of girls each show, giving roses to the ones that he selects to keep going. Eventually, he chooses one and either asks her to marry him or to at least keep dating.

I, for one, think the show is so ridiculous, so forced. And you hear how many of the couples that find "true love" during the show break up dramatically after the show airs. Though I found out that one couple, from the first season of the *Bachelorette*, Ryan and Trista Sutter, have been married for almost 20 years and have two kids. Nevertheless, people criticize the show for many reasons:¹

-One psychotherapist who is a licensed marriage and family therapist said, "the show might idealize power imbalances in a relationship and foster damaging ideas that romantic relationships should always be prioritized over friendships."

-Others said, "the program could inspire viewers to set unrealistic standards for happiness, beauty, and relationships and could cause viewers to normalize the unhealthy idea that it is OK for relationships to have an inherent power imbalance."

-“At its core, the show seems to be reinforcing the unhealthy idea that women should view other women as adversaries.”

-And last: "Viewers may internalize the idea that men are the people who make the choices in the relationship. The dynamics of an unhealthy relationship are set up from the start."

Well, if you think that show is bad, you're going to hate Esther chapter 2 and its version of the *Bachelor*! If you think twenty-five "contestants" is too many, we've got way more here. If you think the power imbalance is bad on the show, wait until you hear the power the Persian king has over every woman in his kingdom. If you see unrealistic standards and unhealthy relationships in the show, you ain't seen nothing yet. David Strain said: "*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.*"²

We started the book of Esther last week, and as with a lot of great stories, we don't meet the main character right away. Chapter 1 didn't mention Esther, it was all about the King of Persia and what his world looked like. It was about the over-the-top, six-months long feast that he threw for his people that ended with him banishing his queen for refusing his request for her presence.

¹ <https://www.insider.com/everything-thats-wrong-with-the-bachelor-according-to-experts-2019-7>

² David Strain's sermon "Beauty and the Beast" found at fpcjackson.org.

We start chapter two by meeting

I. The Girl Who Was Adopted (vv. 1-7)³

¹After 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. ²Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. ³And 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. ⁴And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so. ⁵Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, ⁶who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. ⁷He 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.

These events happened four years after the events of the first chapter. In those years, King Ahasuerus (also known as King Xerxes) went out and attempted to conquer Greece, which turned out to be a disaster. If you've seen the movie *300*, that's the story of the 300 Spartans who stood against Xerxes' army (told from Greece's side). So Ahasuerus lost and returned to Susa, apparently remembering when he got back that he had removed his queen. Did the king just live for four years without a queen? Yes, but he was not exactly alone in his royal bed, there was already a harem of women in the palace. But he did need an official queen, so the plan was for the king to have a big, extensive search to replace Vashti. It was like the Bachelor, except rather than just meeting and talking and going on dates, it basically all happened in the bedroom. Some people like to soften this and make it more PG-rated by saying that it was just a beauty contest, but verse 14 will make it clear that the king was trying these women out in the bedroom.

We finally meet two of our main characters, Mordecai and Esther. We have a bit of Mordecai's family tree, including the fact that he is of the tribe of Benjamin. Does anybody recognize the name of his ancestor, Kish? That was King Saul's father; keep in mind that Mordecai was descended from King Saul, because that will have some bearing on the story later. Mordecai was part of the exiled community of Jews in Susa, his family having been carried away during Nebuchadnezzar's ransacking of Jerusalem a hundred years earlier. Mordecai had become a government official; it's how he was able to move about the palace area freely.

Mordecai had a cousin, the daughter of his uncle, that he was bringing up. Her Hebrew name was Hadassah, her Persian name was Esther, which means "Star." She had two strikes against her in life – she was a Jewish exile and an orphan. But she had both a beautiful face and a beautiful figure, verse 7 tells us, which explains why she was chosen by the palace officials to be part of the search for the king's new queen. The next four verses show us the new life for

II. The Girl Who Was Abducted (vv. 8-11)

⁸So 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. ⁹And 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. ¹⁰Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to

³ Section titles were suggested by Landon Dowden, *Exalting Jesus in Esther* (Nashville: Holman, 2019), p. 63.

make it known. ¹¹ And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

So Esther was taken to the palace. “Abducted” might have been a strong word for me to use; the text doesn’t actually say how she felt about being taken from her home and relocated. She already lived in Susa with Mordecai, she wasn’t taken to a new city or country. And it seems that she adapted quickly - before she could be pleasing to the king, she found favor in the eyes of the man in charge of all of the women, Hegai. Verse 9 says that he gave her special favors in terms of cosmetics, food, and her place in the harem because she won his favor. She also kept in touch with Mordecai, who hung around the palace asking about her. And she kept her word to him that she would keep her Jewish nationality a secret. Somehow, he knew that would be a problem for her, though no threat to the Jews has been discussed yet.

We talked about hiding our faith in the last few weeks of our Luke study as we saw two “undercover” followers of Jesus – Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus the Pharisee – who buried Jesus’ body. So, I repeat here that Jesus wants our light to shine before men, not for us to hide it. If we acknowledge Him before men, He will acknowledge us before His Father (Matthew 10:32). You may think that you should be like Esther, hiding your faith so that you can get into the important places where you can make a difference. But when you get used to hiding your faith, you may just never own it. We should strive to do what God has called us to do, vocationally and in all of life, and to do it with excellence wherever we are, but refuse to compromise our faith in the process. And if that means we hit a glass ceiling at some point, then that’s just what we’re going to have to accept, as followers of Christ.

I was listening to a podcast with a Christian financial expert who is also a professor, James Choi, and the interviewer asked him about the section on his part of the Yale website entitled “Why I Am a Christian.” The interviewer, who is a Christian, told him that he appreciated both the content there but also the fact that it took a lot of courage to post that at a very secular school like Yale. He replied that he had put that page up when he was still in college and at a time when people weren’t getting cancelled and fired for things they had posted online. He said, “I guess when I was entering the job market I could have... taken it down, but that would have felt wrong, to suddenly say, ‘now that I’m about to apply for a job, let’s go undercover.’ ... I felt that I should live out loud as a Christian, to not be ashamed of my faith... There’s a sense that a lot of people have that they need to not be publicly Christian (*in a more secular environment*) until they reach a certain point of security... I can’t think of any examples of ‘closeted Christians’ who suddenly became very public once they made partner at the law firm.”⁴ Once you start hiding your faith and living in fear of that being found out, it becomes a way of life and the stakes only get higher the longer you hide.

For whatever reason, Esther hid her faith and identity; it’s one of the things we should not emulate about her; but one of the things that God would redeem and use. Our final seven verses show us **III. The Girl Who Was Adorned (vv. 12-18)**

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

⁴ Good Faith with David French and Curtis Change podcast, Ep. 47. Personal Finance & Spiritual/Practical Wisdom with James Choi, 10/8/22

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. 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. 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.

Now I can identify with these women who underwent twelve months of beautification. It usually takes me about 20 minutes to shower, shave, get dressed and ready. But on Sunday mornings before I preach, I usually take a few extra minutes to pluck my eyebrows and shave my nose hairs. So I know what it's like to really take that extra time to be beautiful. Wow, I know it takes woman a little longer than men, but twelve months of beauty treatments? It might make a little more sense when we remember that commoners didn't have access to indoor plumbing or running water; so there was not a lot of great hygiene and bathing happening. A lot of these women probably came from pretty dirty environments, so they would have to be scrubbed up to come before the king.

The historian Josephus tells us that there over 400 women who were brought from all over the kingdom for King Ahasuerus to "try out." There were only four things that could happen to these women after they had spent the night trying to please the king. They would never be allowed to go home and be left to a normal life where they would get married and have children. They were now the king's property in some form or fashion, so here were their options:

- 1) If the woman didn't please the king, she became part of his harem, but he never called on her again and she was just stuck with the other rejected concubines to live unmarried in the palace,
- 2) If the woman pleased him to an extent, then she was made a concubine and called up occasionally to spend a night with the king,
- 3) Perhaps she would please him so much that she would become one of his wives and bear his children, or
- 4) She pleased him greatly and became the Queen, his #1 wife.⁵

I don't make the news, I just report it. That's a sick, twisted system that abused women and literally treated them like royal property. This king, who already had a harem of women, essentially sex slaves at his disposal, had to find more in his search for a new queen. And these women had zero choice in the matter, once you were chosen, your life path was determined. It's not like Esther applied to be part of this, or even that she had an option to decline. This society did not have sexual harassment laws to protect the less powerful from those over them taking advantage of them; there was no #MeToo movement to protest powerful men misusing their power. And it's not just the women whose sexuality belonged to the king. "The historian Herodotus reports that five hundred boys were taken from Babylonia and Assyria each year and castrated in the Persian court" to make them "fit" for their service to the king - able to be around the queen and the royal harem without taking advantage of them.⁶ (*Sorry this is graphic, you have to understand.*) Essentially, the king was god and demanded whatever he wanted from his citizens. Obey or die. This was way before the

⁵ Tim Keller, "The Silent Sovereignty of God" July 22, 2022 podcast.

⁶ Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2001), p. 34.

rise of individual rights. The rule of the monarch was absolute, and everyone played their part and obeyed what their king asked. Your life was not your own to decide what you wanted out of life, it was decided for you. We can't comprehend this; our modern minds scream at how unfair it is. But we have to try to understand the actions of the people from inside their culture, not imposing our culture and our values.

It might even appear that the Bible is fine with all of this because the narrator, the author of Esther, describes the events that happened without judgment or comment. The Bible has many instances where sexual sin was not condoned, but it also didn't keep God from working. Jacob had 12 sons with 4 different women – two wives and two maidservants – and God used them in the line of the Messiah and as the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. David and Solomon both had multiple wives. These were not godly decisions and arrangements, but God worked in spite of them. We can be glad that God works in the lives of those who mess up sexually because we are still prone to that 2,500 years after the events of Esther's story. God desires that we be sexually pure outside of marriage, but we can find forgiveness and healing when we don't live up to that standard.

So Esther won the overnight audition with the king. Esther won favor in his eyes just like she had been winning the favor of everyone else. She received a crown and was the official Queen, but that didn't mean that she had many rights; she still had to be granted entrance into the king's presence, she couldn't just waltz in anytime she wanted. So, the king threw another feast to celebrate his new queen. The book of Esther has more feasts than the rest of the Old Testament combined, it seems! He was so happy to have his new queen that he gave everybody a break on their taxes and added gifts on top of that.

Conclusion

We see that Esther is like us. Her two names show her two identities. Hadassah was a young Jewish girl whose people held on to their faith in Yahweh, the God of their forefathers. Esther was a beautiful young woman trying to survive in a pagan city and palace using not only her beauty but also her charm. To make progress in one world/one identity, would be to suppress and deny the other identity. She concealed her faith, both because her uncle told her to and because it seemed the only way to advance in that world. The text seems to say she was taken or forced to participate in this, but there also seem to be hints that she was trying to impress everyone around her, trying to win that crown. The verbs are active not passive – “she won favor” not “she found favor” - there's a difference. Esther was completely compliant and did everything that Mordecai, Hegai, and the King want from her. So on the one hand, there have been critiques from those who are on the “feminist” side - they are down on Esther because she became the compliant Barbie that the men want her to be; Vashti is the better model because she refused the king. Christians and Jews look at Esther and are down on her as well because she didn't act like Daniel and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who refused to eat the food or bow to the idols that the Babylonians forced on them. Instead, Esther gave in and slept with a pagan king on top of most likely eating non-kosher foods, breaking the Sabbath, and all kinds of other ways that she compromised on. It's easy for us to slam her, we don't have to try to survive in that horrible culture. Alistair Begg said,

“It isn't necessary for us to approve of the path that she's taken... We recognize that God was providentially in control of the drama that has taken place in her life... but we don't have to say that the decisions that she made along the way were all good decisions. Because I don't think they were... But we ought to be encouraged, because the events of God's providence in our lives are not as tidy as we might wish. Review your life and realize that not all your decisions

were good ones, not all your plans were selfless, and yet God in His providence has brought you to this day.”⁷

I would say, let’s not judge Esther at the beginning of her story but at the end.

Just like Esther, today’s world wants us to go through all the beauty treatments and win favor in everyone’s eyes by how we look. We are driven by the world’s standards of beauty, and the fact that the more attractive people get more praise and attention. Our culture is so obsessed with physical beauty. We have occasional reminders that plus-size women or people with handicaps are wonderful and beautiful too, but not very often; the majority of advertising and marketing gets our attention with beauty. And so we all feel pressure to look perfect, to somehow measure up to these images. My heart breaks thinking about how teen girls feel so much pressure to look perfect. But we all feel it - I’m an almost 50-year-old man who has been married longer than I was single, and I still wish I looked like Hugh Jackman or Chris Evan with their shirts off. I’m never going to look like that without steroids and a full-time personal trainer. But we all want to measure up and we rarely do. Christians, of all people, should be those who accept everyone no matter what they look like on the outside. And we should stop trying to rise to the impossible beauty standards and superficial acceptance that comes with being one of the “beautiful people.” Our inward beauty is way more important.

Do you believe that God created you in your mother’s womb, as Psalm 139 says? Do you believe that He formed your inward parts? That you are fearfully and wonderfully made, intricately woven? If you really believed that, then you would accept the height you are, you wouldn’t wish you had a smaller nose or head or ears, or a different body shape, or especially a different gender. I’m not ranting about the transgender ideology, but it makes all the difference in the world whether you believe that a personal God created you or not. If you believe that you were just an evolved product of random chance, then, hey, maybe I am the wrong gender, maybe I need to change/transition to be happy. But if God knit you together, took the care to design you, then you are perfect the way you were made. I’m not saying you have to completely give up trying to look nice or never work out; let’s do what we can to be healthy. But we’re so obsessed with the world’s mostly unattainable standards of beauty that it robs us of our joy in appreciating how God made us. Ladies, the world tells you that you need to show off for men. You don’t. You’re a daughter of the true King, who created you perfectly the way He wanted to - you need no man’s approval. *Don’t use your body to find approval and love.*

How do we please the true King of kings? What does the Bible say about winning God’s delight?

- 1) By having integrity. Proverbs 11:20 – *“Those of crooked heart are an abomination to the Lord, but those of blameless ways are His delight.”*
- 2) Being Honest. Proverbs 12:22 – *“Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight.”*
- 3) Staying away from evil. Ephesians 5:10-11 – *“Try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord. Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them.”*
- 4) Living a life of wisdom and good deeds. Colossians 1:10 – *“...walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”*
- 5) Obeying your parents. Colossians 3:20 – *“Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.”*

⁷ Alistair Begg’s Sermon “Mordecai and Esther” found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqkjcNbEs04>.

But here's the thing: we can't truly please God. We're always going to fall way short of His standard of perfection. In our natural state, we are displeasing to God because we choose to be His enemies. We first need to be justified before God before we can please Him and do the works that I just listed. Jesus is the King who gave Himself up for you. He's not like Ahaseurus, sitting back and waiting for all of us to parade in front of Him so He can give us the thumbs up or thumbs down; only picking the really spiritual ones. Instead, He suffered and died for His people. Jesus chose His bride, the Church, not because she was perfect and beautiful, but because she was ugly and broken down by the weight of her sin. Romans 5:6, 8 – *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly... God shows His love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* Jesus didn't wait for us to make ourselves beautiful for Him, He died to wash us clean. Ephesians 5:25b-27 – *“Christ loved the church and gave Himself up for her, that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that He might present the church to Himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.”* We are not like Esther and the other women hoping to make ourselves perfect for the King of kings. Instead, Jesus converses us with His beauty and holiness, transforming us into the spotless bride of Christ. When a sinner comes to faith in Christ, the angels rejoice, there is a feast in heaven and God bestows His gifts on that redeemed soul. May we be always grateful for Jesus' grace and forgiveness that makes us beautiful, righteous, and worthy in God's sight, and bestows on us the kingdom of heaven.

Benediction

2 Corinthians 13:11 - *“Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.”*