

Esther 2. God is working through the circumstances of this story to deliver his OT covenant people from extermination, but it is a sad, sad story. It is good news, of course, that God is going to save his people, but the context in which it happens is so very, very sad. And that gives us a sense of how awful sin is.

In chapter 1, King Ahasuerus had demanded that his Queen Vashti show herself for the pleasure of a roomful of drunken men and she had refused. That embarrassed and angered the king and he had made a law of the Persians and the Medes that she could never appear before him again and that she had to be replaced as Queen. Chapter 2 begins by hinting that perhaps the King regretted his foolishness or at least that he missed having Queen Vashti in his bed.

The king's advisors have a solution. It seems that this king did very little thinking for himself. He is always surrounded by advisors and he always seems to be taking their advice. He does not come across as someone who did much serious thinking. Mostly, as far as he is pictured in the book of Esther, he just does what he is told to do by his advisors. In this case, they propose a plan to come up with a suitable queen for the king. It will include the resources of the realm being used to find a large number of beautiful young virgins who would be brought to the king's harem. Kings had harems in those days. A large number of beautiful women were kept at the king's expense and cared for by eunuchs so that whenever the king had an urge for the companionship of a woman, he always had a large selection of beauties to choose from. The eunuchs were men who had been castrated so that they could care for the king's women without the danger of them having sex with any of them.

The whole system is utterly repugnant from a moral perspective. All of these women were basically slaves for the sexual gratification of a king, All these men were castrated to qualify them to care for the king's harem without sampling the goods for themselves. All of these people whose sole purpose was to satisfy the sexual desires of one powerful man. And this practice was not limited to the pagan kings. Just think of David with his concubines and Solomon with his 700 wives and 300 concubines.

The situation described in this chapter is even more ridiculous. Each of these beautiful young women went through a whole year of beauty treatments and then one by one they would be chosen to spend a night having sex with the king. Verse 12 tells us that "each young woman would go into 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..." 12 months of beauty treatments to prepare them for one night with the king. This whole apparatus of housing and beautifying young women for the sexual gratification of one man. The evil of that is astounding.

And then, once she had had her night with the king, a woman would be sent to a second harem to house those who had been used by the king and there she would stay unless she stood out enough from the others that the king might summon her again.

Just think of what this whole practice said about the value of these women! They existed for the sexual gratification of the king. And most of them were only considered good enough for one use – like a paper plate which is thrown away after it is used. It is true that they were pampered and looked after. They did not have to worry where their next meal was coming from. Physically they were far better off than their less attractive sisters. And it may be that some of them considered it an honor to be in the king's harem. But at what cost to their dignity! At what cost to their sense of self. Their whole value was to give this king a night or two of sexual pleasure.

These are women who could have had husbands and families. These were women who could have been valued as individuals who were valuable for who they were as human beings. The evil of his whole harem system was unspeakably degrading for these women.

And it is equally sad and appalling that there are still many women and men who are treated in this way. No doubt there are still some powerful men who have harems, but there is also the vast world of sexual slavery as well as other forms of slavery in which people are valued only for sexually gratifying other people or are in other forms of slavery as objects to be used by other people. And this gives us one insight into the sinfulness of sin. There are many insights into the sinfulness of sin and many of them come from our own hearts and lives. We should never consider the sins of others as if we are without sin. But this whole vast area of sexual slavery is one which highlights how terribly some people treat other people and it is part of the misery that is in the world because of sin. It shows us how cruel sin is. It shows us how terribly some people suffer because of the reality of sin. And those who engage in viewing pornography are part of that whole system.

As believers in the God of the Bible part of our hope is that God is at work to renew the world so that one day there will be no more suffering of any kind – including the suffering of the used, the oppressed and the exploited. Jesus came to win the victory over sin. That includes saving us from sin, but it also includes saving the world from sin. When we see so many people in the world who are suffering because of being treated as objects by other people we can look forward to a world where everyone will truly love and care for one another and the horrors of sexual exploitation will be no more. We are to live in such a way to show the world what a world of love looks like by the grace of God, but we are also to live in hope of a world where everyone treats others with love because of God's love for us in Christ. When we think of the horrors of sexual slavery, we can be comforted to know that God's plan of salvation will result in a world in which such evils no longer exist.

Esther was brought into King Ahasuerus' harem. Verses 5-11 introduce us to Mordecai and Esther. They are identified as Jews. A little of their family history is given. Mordecai's great-grandfather had been among the captives carried away from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon around 100 years earlier. The family then had lived as exiles for generations, but they still maintained their Jewish identity. That is an important

part of the story. The story is about how the Jews were threatened with genocide and how God delivered them from that.

Mordecai was raising Esther who was also named Hadassah. She had a Jewish name and a Persian name. That reflects the reality of being a Jew living in a Gentile culture. Her Jewish identity is still important, but her Persian name made it possible for her to move among the Persians without making her Jewishness known. Esther's parents had died. Mordecai was an older cousin, and he became a father-figure for Esther. The text says that he "took her as his own daughter." The text also highlights her beauty. "Verse 7, "The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at...." That is why she was chosen to be part of the king's harem – to be among the number from whom the new queen would be chosen. Notice that it is all about beauty. Nothing is said about her character. But she is obviously loved by Mordecai.

So, Esther was chosen as one of the most beautiful young women in the realm. She was part of the group of beauties out of which King Ahasuerus would choose his new queen. We are told nothing about what she thought about this. We are told that she pleased Hegai who was the eunuch in charge of the harem. She advanced to the best place in the harem. The text does not say why. It only says in verse 9, "And the young woman pleased him and won his favor." That does suggest some effort on her part. It also suggests that God was at work in this situation.

The text makes a point of saying that Esther had kept her Jewishness a secret. Verse 10, "Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known." This is very significant for the story in various ways. The story unfolds as it does because initially her Jewishness is hidden and then at a crucial point later in the story, she will decide to inform the king that she is a Jew.

Verses 15ff tell what happened when Esther's turn came to go and spend the night with the King. The text stresses her connection to Mordecai, reminding us of her Jewishness. It says that she accepts Hegai's advice as to what to bring with her into the king's bedroom. Apparently, the women were allowed to bring with them certain perfumes or other trappings that might make them more desirable to the king. Esther accepts Hegai's advice. Again, it is stressed that Esther "was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her." This reminds us of Joseph and the way in which his rise to his high place in Egypt was paved by Joseph finding favor in prison. Genesis 39:21 says, "And the LORD was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper in the prison." The fact that Esther is describe multiple times as finding favor with people suggests to us that God is behind her being chosen by King Ahasuerus to be his queen.

And that is what happened. "And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus ... 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, the way that Esther stands out from all the rest – that once the King had enjoyed Esther's beauty, he knew that she was the one for him – all of that signals to us that God was behind all this – God was behind Esther finding favor with everyone who mattered,

and God was behind Esther finding favor with the king. We know that because of the role that Esther is going to play in saving God's people from extermination, but all these statements about Esther finding favor are signals to us that God was behind Esther's rise to become King Ahasuerus' queen.

Putting this way raises the question of God's connection to sin. God caused Esther to become queen through causing her to find favor in a situation where she was not finding favor through being a nice Jewish girl. She is finding favor in a king's harem. She finds the favor of the man who was grooming her for a night of sex with the king. He finds favor with a king who is not interested in women as people but as sex objects. This is not exactly a situation where you would expect a nice Jewish girl to shine and where God's involvement would cause one of his people to shine.

Here we must remember that God's greatness is such that he is able use sin without himself being the author of sin. The greatest example of this in the Bible is the text in Acts 2 that we looked at last week, Acts 2:23, which says that Jesus was crucified "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" and yet that the sin of that lay at the feet of those who were involved in sentencing Jesus to death and carrying out that sentence. We do not understand how that can be, but it belongs to the greatness of God that he can use sinful actions of human beings to fulfill his purposes without himself being the author of those sins or in any way approving of them.

That question is raised by the signals in the story that God was at work in this sleazy situation to see to it that Esther was chosen to be the queen. Another question is a little more complicated to answer and that has to do with how we are to think of Esther and her behaviour in this story. The question becomes more interesting when we ask, "How does the author of the story wants us to think of Esther in this part of the story?" He does not tell us explicitly. He describes Esther as hiding her Jewishness following Mordecai's advice. He describes her as being chosen and taken into the king's harem without telling us what she thought of this. He describes her as finding favor in the context of being groomed for her night with the king. He describes her as going through the night of being the king's lover and immediately being chosen as the winner. The author makes no explicit moral judgment of Esther's involvement in this whole affair. He does not enlighten us as to what Esther might have been thinking.

This is interesting because this book is part of the Bible and the Bible is very interested in morality. The apparent neutrality of the author about what he thought of Esther's morality is striking and interesting. And it makes us wonder why he presents Esther in this way. What is also interesting is that the commentators range from approval to disapproval.

Part of the answer to the question of why the author makes no comment approving or disapproving of Esther's actions in this chapter is that his purpose in telling the story is not to encourage sexual morality, but to show how God worked in a hidden way in a pagan godless context to deliver his people from extermination. If that is the case his goal in telling the story is not that we dwell on the rightness or wrongness of Esther's

actions in this part of the story, but rather on the way that God guided the situation to bring about the deliverance of his people. There is something to be said for that perspective, but in a book like the Bible it is unlikely that we are ever to pass over sinful behaviour without even making some kind of judgment in the light of the rest of Scripture.

There is one other factor to be considered and that is that the OT often passes over behaviour that we know to be wrong without commenting on it. And in particular for our current reflection, I am thinking of how often key figures among God's people – people who are known for being faithful to God – have more than one wife or have multiple concubines. David and Solomon had multiple concubines. Concubines were second-tier wives who were kept so a king, or a rich man, could have multiple sexual partners and in some instances to produce children. Multiple concubines were also a status symbol.

And the OT reports these things without condemning them. Even Solomon with his 700 wives and 300 concubines ... the criticism, when it comes in 1 Kings 11, is not the fact that he had so many wives and concubines, but the fact that many of them were foreigners and that they “turned his heart after other gods.”

It appears that what is clear to us in the light of NT revelation was not clear always clear to God's people in the OT period, particularly, concerning God's will that marriage consist of one man and one woman and that a man having multiple wives and even concubines was a violation of the 7th commandment. In the OT period it was possible for Abraham and David to be godly men and still have multiple wives and concubines. It seems obvious that the people of God living in those times did not see the evil of such living arrangements. And that suggests that there is progression as we move through Scripture in the people of God understanding the implications of God's moral law. This too may be part of the reason that the author of Esther reports on this process of choosing the next queen for King Ahasuerus without explicitly disapproving of it. It could be that he just accepted this practice as the way things were.

There are two areas however, where the author is likely expecting us to disapprove: the fact that she hid the fact that she was Jewish and the fact that she married a foreign king. These are things that the OT stresses and that the Jewish people understood clearly. Many of the OT laws were designed to keep the Jewish people separate from the peoples that surrounded them. Their diet was strictly prescribed, and they were to keep the Sabbath. Many of the things that God commanded his people to do were things that would cause his people to stand out from the people around them. Hiding the fact that you were Jewish meant that you were not following the Jewish diet and the Sabbath to name only a few of the regulations. And the matter of marrying someone who was not Jewish was a big deal. Deuteronomy 7:3 tells the Israelite not to intermarry with people from the nations – and the reason given is that doing so will lead to serving the gods of the nations.

I think that the author of Esther is expecting us to disapprove of Esther at this point probably mostly for hiding the fact that she was a Jew and, in the light of that, not keeping the Jewish practices that would have made her Jewishness obvious. It is interesting to compare Esther's behaviour to that of Daniel and his three friends.

They were very upfront about their Jewishness. They refused to eat from the king's table. They were explicit about their allegiance to the God of Israel. And they refused to comply when the king tried to force them to worship his gods.

Now it's certainly appropriate that we look at what is described this chapter and see the abuse of these women and the sexual sin in it even if the author of the book was probably not as concerned about these things as we are. In the light of what we know from the NT and thousands of years of the church reflecting on the biblical teaching on marriage and sex, there is no question that this whole system of kings with their harems was horribly wrong – degrading to the women and the eunuchs – and a horrible misuse of God's gift of sex. And as we have done at the beginning of this sermon, we can think of how similar things have gone on throughout history and still today and long for the beauty and purity and wholesomeness of what God is working toward in his plan of salvation.

But the thing that the author is probably more concerned that we notice and reflect upon is how Esther hid her Jewishness – that she did not adhere to the practices that would have immediately identified her as a Jew. The way that the story is told makes it clear that, for the author, the fact that Esther was a Jew and the fact that she hid her Jewishness was a sign of weakness and compromise on her part. We are meant to see her as weak and compromising at this point in the story.

Just think that this book was written in a situation that was similar to the situation described in the book – the Jewish people living among pagan nations. It was hugely important for those Jewish people that they maintained their Jewish identity and pass it on through many generations. They had been chosen by God to be a blessing to the nations of the world and the people from whom the Messiah would come. Their survival as a people was necessary for God's salvation to be accomplished. They could be lost as a separate people through extermination, but they could also be lost as a separate people through assimilation. And what Esther is demonstrating at this point is assimilation. She was just blending in. She was not living as a Jew. And perhaps that was as great a danger as the extermination plot that is central in the story of this book.

And the lesson for us from this part of the story is that we are called to be visible representatives of God in the midst of the world. It is very clear from the NT teaching addressed to the followers of Jesus that we are to stand out as believers both by our actions and by our confession. And that was the case for OT believers as well. A huge part of God's call for his people in all ages is that they live as a distinct people before a watching world to reflect the wisdom and the glory of God in their lives.

Think of Jesus' words in Matthew 10:32, "So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven."

As believers we are not meant to blend in with the world. We are to stand out. Not necessarily by a peculiar way of dressing, but by a godly way of living and by being up-front about the fact that we are followers of Jesus. We are meant to shine as lights in the world. Esther at this point in the story was blending in. She is presented here as an example of how God's people are not to relate to the world.

But there is an encouragement here for us as well and that is that God still used Esther in a significant way in the fulfillment of his plan for his people. Esther came to the point where she was willing to risk her life to in order to preserve her people.

There is grace in this story in that it shows how God uses very flawed people to accomplish his purposes and that he also uses circumstances for their growth. We understand that grace so much more clearly now after Jesus gave his life for our sins and was raised from the dead so that his people might be forgiven and share in his resurrection life. How we live is important and God calls us to represent him before the world. But that does not mean perfection. Esther shows us how God uses weak people, and we know that he still does that because his acceptance of us is not based on how faithful we are but on how faithful Jesus was. And it is in that light that we hear the word of God in this text calling us to shine as lights in the world holding forth the word of life.