

“An Unlikely Queen”

Esther 2:1-18

Pastor Dan Erickson

August 14, 2022

In the United States, we have long said that any boy, or now any girl, can grow up to be president. The reason is that unlike monarchs, presidents are elected. In many places, both in the ancient and modern worlds, a nation's ruler is replaced by an heir, a son, daughter, grandson, or some other family member. And though it is becoming more frequent that a prince or princess marries a commoner, the expectation usually is that a royal will marry another royal.

One of the amazing parts of the story of Queen Esther is how she even gets to be queen. This is a young gal who not only lacks royal blood, but also has no wealth or political influence. She becomes queen of the Persian empire even though she is not even Persian, but a Jewess.

This morning, our journey through the book of Esther brings us to chapter 2 where we see a remarkable account of how Esther becomes Queen, an account which also has some important lessons for us. Let's pause and pray we would hear and heed God's words to us today.

In chapter 1 Queen Vashti refuses to respond to the King's summons, and he banishes her from the palace. **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.** The King may be having second thoughts about his decision. **Esther 2:2-4 Then the king's young men who attended him said, “Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. 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. And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.” This please the king, and he did so.**

Now, in 3rd grade Sunday School class this is a “beauty contest.” But the text is pretty clear these girls are being recruited for a harem, and the gal most pleasing to the king will be the new queen. Now, it would be difficult to avoid being drafted

into this contest, but it is obvious that no one faithful to the Lord would want to be part of it.

Incidentally, in 2005, King Mswati III of Swaziland, who already had 12 wives, invited eligible young women in his country to be part of a contest to become his 13th wife. 50,000 gals showed for the competition. He had them all dance in the royal stadium wearing nothing but beaded miniskirts. Okay, back to ancient Persia. **Esther 2:5 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, 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.** Mordecai, the Jew, has basically adopted his younger cousin Esther. He sounds like a good guy, raising a good-looking cousin. That is the background for what happens.

Esther 2:8-11 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. (She is to be part of the harem.) **And the young woman pleased him (Hegai, the eunuch in charge of the harem) 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. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.**

Now I am sure Mordecai's concern for Esther was genuine, but some strange things happen in this paragraph. Think for a moment of some other exiles, Daniel and his three friends living a few years earlier in pagan Babylon. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refuse to bow down to the image of the pagan king and are thrown into a furnace where God delivers them.

Daniel insists on praying every day to the true God, even though the pagan king forbids it. He is thrown into a lion's den, where God delivers him. These men would rather risk death than compromise their obedience to God's law. Yet, rather than stand up for their faith in the one true God, Mordecai instructs Esther to conceal her identity as a Jew and she complies.

Over the centuries commentators have tried to explain what is going on here. One Greek translation of the book added words to the text saying that Esther only ate kosher food when she was part of the harem and never actually slept with the king. But that is not what the God inspired text of Esther says happened. The author makes no attempt to vindicate Esther and Mordecai by explaining extenuating circumstances or by giving any indication they were told by God to behave as they did. The text just reports the actions.

These comments by Abraham Save, a 15th century Jewish Rabbi are very interesting: *"Now when Mordecai heard the king's herald announcing that whoever had a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to sleep with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass?... He should have been killed rather than submit to such an act... She (Esther) too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to sleep with Ahasuerus."*

Wow, that does seem a bit extreme, but today, Professor Ronald Pierce basically agrees. *"(Esther) desires a chance at the throne so greatly that she is willing to betray her heritage at the advice of her cousin without a hint of resistance."*

According to verses 12, 13 each of the girls in this harem of young virgins is given a full year of beauty treatments, then when it was her turn she would spend the night with King Ahasuerus. **Esther 2:14 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.**

Scholars estimate anywhere between 400 and 1000 girls have been brought into the harem. Most are in there later teen years. After one night with the king, a gal whom he didn't like would apparently be part of a "reserve harem" the king never used. She was stuck in the place, could not marry, and really didn't have much of a life. Some one the king liked would become a concubine in the primary harem and would be called occasionally to sleep with the king. A gal whom the king really liked, would become his wife, there would be maybe three or four of these. The children she bore would be royal heirs. And the wife he liked best would be the queen. That Esther would be the one to become queen is still a longshot.

Yet, **Esther 2:15b Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her.** Her physical beauty and personality meant she stood out among the harem of young virgins. So, **Esther 2:16, 17 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, 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.**

Don't miss what has happened here. A Jewish girl, who appeared to have no significant background or connections, is now the queen of the Persian empire. That seems incredible. How could that happen? How could it happen so quickly?

The king thinks it is a big deal. **Esther 2:18 Then the king have 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.**

Okay, that is our text. Now let's consider a couple of lessons for us.

Number 1 – Being faithful to the Lord in a culture that doesn't care about God is not easy. It is often difficult to even know what that looks like. Rabbi Saba and others accuse Mordecai and Esther of being unfaithful to God.

Other Bible teachers defend them. Some emphasize that Mordecai and Esther didn't really have a choice, that she "was taken" to the king's

harem, and that it was better to submit than be killed and commit suicide as Rabbi Saba suggested.

Others emphasize that the compromises Mordecai and Esther make are justified because it was all part of God's plan to save the Jews. They did what was necessary to do, thus in the big picture, they did the right thing.

I don't buy that view, because I don't think that either Mordecai or Esther was plotting to make her the queen. I don't think with of them had any idea, at that point, of the danger the Jewish people would be in. Now, I am not an expert on the book of Esther, nor am I in a position to judge the choices Esther and Mordecai make in the book. Yet, I do think it is clear that they were not exactly devout Jews. I believe that living in exile from Jerusalem, Mordecai and Esther were really not sure about what God expected of them. They just do what seems like the best thing to do at the time, focused mainly on their own self-interest. Some of Esther's choices later in the book seem more noble, as she is willing to sacrifice her safety for the sake of the Jewish people.

Yet, if one is looking for a true hero in the book, I suspect it is not really either Esther or Mordecai that deserves the title, but rather a character who is not even named, though as I say, his fingerprints are all over the story. The hero of the book of Esther is the Lord God Himself.

Now, as Christians, believer in Jesus Christ, we should have much clearer understanding of what the Lord expects from us than Mordecai and Esther did. We have the Bible, including the New Testament, plus the Holy Spirit who enable us to understand God's words. There are plenty of instructions not only about what we should do, but how we should do it.

Now, sometimes the instructions are a bit nuanced. For example, it is wrong to lie, but deceiving people doing evil, like when the Hebrew midwives protect the babies from Pharaoh in Exodus 1 is not a lie. Thus, I believe if Nazi soldiers ask if you are hiding Jews and there are some in your attic, it is okay to say, "no." Yet, it is not okay to commit a sin in order to accomplish a greater good.

Yet, there will still be different views on how Christians are to deal with the increasingly anti-Christian culture in which we live. Most would agree that we should not be like Mordecai and Esther and just try to blend in so that others don't notice we are different from them. At the same time, few think it is wise to make sure everyone knows about our opposition to everything in our culture which is contrary to God's word. If we do that, we will consume all of our time focusing on what we are against and will have little time or energy to share the Gospel, the great news of Jesus, with others.

And there may be a variety of appropriate response to ungodly ideas and practices in our culture. For example, when it comes to abortion, I have friends who have committed themselves to protesting at abortion clinics or illegally blocking them as "Operation Rescue" did in the 1990's. For over 20 years, the primary way I expressed my opposition to abortion was in the political realm wanting to get pro-life candidates elected to office. For the past 20 years, however, I have focused on working through the Family Life Center, seeking to help women and families so they would not feel forced to choose abortion because they didn't think they could raise a child. It is not always easy to know what the best strategy is to stand against evil in our society.

Now, it is good to discuss what is the best response to anti-Christian things in our culture and why that is the case. But we should be ready for some different perspectives among fellow Christian. When the Bible doesn't lay out a particular strategy, we need to respect the choices others are making, yet always be encouraging one another to be faithful to the Lord, even when that is not an easy thing to do.

Number 2 - The Lord uses imperfect people to accomplish His purposes. This is a very encouraging truth for the 99% of the people in this room who are not perfect. This is what Jobes writes in her commentary: *The silence about Esther and Mordecai's character and spiritual fidelity is a powerful encouragement. Regardless of whether they always knew what the right choice was or whether they had the best of motives, God was working through even their imperfect decisions and actions fulfill his perfect purposes. Other than Jesus, even the godliest people of the Bible were flawed, often confused, and sometimes outright disobedient.*

We are not different from them. Yet our gracious God omnipotently works his perfect plan through them, through us, and most surprisingly, even through powerful political structures that sometimes operate in evil ways.

Friends, if you are like me, you have made some not so good decisions over the years. Some of them can be corrected and it is usually a good thing to do that. Some of the bad decisions, however, are ones you just have to live with. Sometimes it was just ignorance, you didn't know better. The good news is that your imperfect decisions and actions will not mess up God's plan. Mordecai and Esther don't seem to be very concerned about following Torah, the Jewish Law, but that doesn't prevent God from using them to save the Jewish people.

Don't be confused, the Lord certainly wanted them to be faithful in following His commands. Their lives would have been better if they would have chosen to do so. The point, however, is that God can take our flaws, failures, foolishness, and sins and use them to accomplish His purpose, which always includes... you should know this... His glory and our ultimate good. A good that may not be experienced until heaven.

Often, however, we will catch a glimpse of how God is using unpleasant, painful things in our lives for our good, right now. A trouble or trial we go through may end up resulting in an increase in our joy just a short time down the road. This promise belongs to "those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." This is not a promise God makes to a certain elite group of Christians. As Job says, we are all flawed, confused and sometimes outright disobedient.

This is a promise made to all who by grace, through faith, have trusted in Jesus Christ to save them. This is a promise made to all who have been justified, declared not guilty, through trusting in Jesus Christ, and how have His perfect righteousness counted as their own.

This is promises made to all believers in Jesus, who are now God's sons and daughters. In all things, in all aspects of our lives, he will work for our ultimate good and for His glory!

What does this look like in real life? We, maybe you married the wrong person. You chose to

marry an unbeliever even though you knew the Bible tells us not to be unequally yoked. Yet, the Bible is also clear you are not to leave that unbelieving spouse if he/she wants to remain married. In that situation, you can be confident that the Lord has not given up on you. He is not going to continually punish you for a wrong choice you made. He is going to work for your ultimate good.

Or maybe you divorced someone to who you should have stayed married. Maybe instead of going to Bible college and preparing to be a missionary, you went to business school and got an MBA so you could become wealthy. Maybe you were too strict of a parent to your children. Maybe you were too lenient. Maybe you really goofed up and said some pretty hurtful things to people you care about.

Again, sometimes you can work to correct your mistakes. But even when you can't, remember, your imperfect choices, including your sinful choices, make you like Mordecai and Esther and like everyone else except Jesus. His perfect obedience enabled Him to be the sacrifice for your sins. Yes, confess your sins to the Lord, because if you do, **1 John 1:9b, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

But be assured, find hope in the fact that despite your bad decisions, God is working in your life, helping you learn, helping you grow, and helping you develop a character that is more and more like Jesus Christ.

Friends, God is not finished with you yet. You are still a work in progress. But you are a work that the Lord will complete. For that reason, be of good cheer as you seek to trust and follow Him each day.