

The Persian King's Pleasure & the True King's Perfect Providence

Esther 2:1-18 | Notes

I. The King's Pleasure Pursued (Virgin's Sought) (v1-4)

People often make poor decisions when their ego gets bruised and their pride takes the driver's seat. Such was the case for the king.

- Once his "anger...abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done" (v1). The word for "remembered" indicates some measure of remorse.
- There is something which Ahasuerus now realizes he has lost by his rash, ego-driven behavior.
- But unbelievers have nothing to do with their remorse, nothing that can truly take it away. That can only come through repentance & faith in Christ.
- Thus, Ahasuerus, like so many people today, tries to drown out the noise of conviction, to soothe the pain of his troubled conscience, & to suppress the shame and guilt he feels in his soul over his ungodly life, beneath the fountain of fleshly indulgence.
- He thinks that more money, more power, more pleasure, more sex, more comfort, luxury, and ease will give him the internal peace he longs for.
- But it won't. It won't work for Ahasuerus and it won't work for you and I either. But that did not stop him from trying.
- His counselors, who the text says were "young men"—that is, men without much experience, wisdom, or perspective—recommended a truly wretched remedy for the king's depressed state.

Their solution to the king's self-inflicted misery was to use & abuse the young virgins throughout the Persian empire like new play toys for the king.

- We need to understand very clearly that this was **NOT a beauty pageant** in which they invited interested young women to voluntarily participate.
- This was government officials scouring the land to forcefully abduct any young woman who they thought might bring sexual pleasure to the king.
- Such vile mistreatment of women as sexual objects to be used and abused by men is a heinous evil which is to be abhorred by all.
- It is the same kind of evil which fuels the pornography industry & the unspeakably tragic sexual-slavery which are hideously rampant in our times.
- Yet, this plan which the "young men" suggested to the sullen, selfish, & sordid king, "pleased" him. So it is exactly what he authorized to take place.
- For King Ahasuerus, as for many in our own days, pleasure was the measure of morality, rather than the holy Law of God written upon their hearts.

II. The King's Pleasure Procured (Esther Taken) (v5-11)

Before the story proceeds we are now introduced to its two main characters: Mordecai and Esther. (Read v5-8)

- Mordecai is introduced to us as "a Jew" who comes from a very high pedigree. He is a descendent of Israel's 1st king: Saul of the tribe of "Benjamin". (These details of Mordecai's heritage will begin to reveal their significance once we enter chapter 3, so keep them in mind.)
- But alongside this high place as (1) one of God's covenant people & (2) a descendent of a king, is the repetition "carried away"—that is, **exiled**. (3x in v6)
- This juxtaposition of details is a subtle way that the author is showing us the tension and confusion of Mordecai and Esther's present lives:
Are they favored & beloved by God? Are they his chosen people dwelling w/ the hope of his promises? Or are they forsaken & forgotten in a foreign land?
- We are also told that Esther, while striking in physical beauty (v7), is nevertheless a deeply vulnerable person. Not only is Esther a woman (in a world that only honored men), she is also a Jew (minority), born in the midst of her people's exile, & orphaned as a child through the death of her parents.
- In short, Esther is anything but the person the world would think of as a picture of strength or as a future hero. Her situation was bleak at best.

As the author is inviting us to consider their situation, he is already beginning to illumine the struggle they are facing to hold onto their faith.

- You will notice that both Mordecai and Esther are **NOT** Hebrew names. The fact that it is their Babylonian names which are emphasized by the author is intended to subtly tell us that they were in a position in which their heritage as God's covenant people was fading away from them.
- Weak, outnumbered, and surrounded by foreign powers, foreign gods, foreign values, and foreign practices, **Esther and Mordecai were losing faith**.
- They were doubting God's presence with them, God's promises to them, & God's good purpose for the events of their present lives.

And it was in the very midst of their already weakened & wavering faith that the king's selfish "edict" now brought a cold knock at their own door.

- Esther's "beauty" was just the sort of allurements that this wicked king was seeking & so we are told that she was "taken into the king's palace..." (v8)
- **Can you imagine what this would be like?** Can you imagine what sort of rage, fear, & doubt would be assailing your heart? Can you imagine walking through this situation & asking God: What are you doing Lord!? Why would you let this happen!? Where is the love and protection you promised!?
- To every fleshly sense, it would seem as though God had abandoned you or that there was never any God at all... just a delusion you naively believed.

Yet, in v9-11 we learn three very subtle, yet very important details to the context of this story: (Read v9-11)

1. 1st we learn in v9 that God was, in fact, with Esther, even in this unspeakably egregious hour.

- From the moment she entered the "harem" Esther was "favored", protected, and provided for unlike any other woman among them. ("Best place")
- **Daniel in the Lion's Den:** God did not keep Daniel from entering the den, instead God was with him in it, & stopped the mouths of the lions. (Daniel 6)
- The same is true for us, beloved. Jesus did not say that he will keep us from sorrow, suffering and even, if necessary, death in his service. Instead, he said that he would be with us always, in everything we face, and that he will not lose even one of the sheep whom the Father has given to him.

2. 2nd, and in contrast to the first, we learn in v10 that rather than relying on their identity as God's chosen people, they began to hide it.

- You may think at first that this is not such a big deal. But we need to stop & consider it more carefully. The Jews, like Christians today, were called to live a very distinct lifestyle in the midst of the world. It was a lifestyle which could not easily be hidden away unless you were being unfaithful.
- The fact that Esther & Mordecai were successful in hiding their Jewish ethnicity already tells us something about the weakness of their faith leading up to these events & just how much of the "world" had already seeped in. (i.e. Think of Daniel's refusal to eat the king's food vs Esther's full compliance)

- If they were living wholly devoted lives, holding fast to God's Word & Law, it would have been clear to all that they were Jews from the beginning.
- But it was not clear to everyone. And this is yet a further evidence of the point I made earlier about the present state of Esther & Mordecai's faith.
- They had apparently adopted enough of the norms of the Persian culture that no one could tell the difference between them & the world any longer.

3. Moreover, the author chose to use the words "won favor" (twice) rather than the more common biblical phrase "found favor". (see v9, v15)

- **"Found favor"** is typical biblical language for describing the hand of God graciously providing for his people on the basis of his love. (i.e. Gen. 6:8; Luke 1:30)
- To say that Esther **"won favor"** puts the basis of that favor back onto Esther's own actions. This seems to suggest that, at this point, Esther **thought** she was on her own; she **thought** God had forsaken her, and therefore, she **thought** that the fate of her future was all up to her own effort and wits.

The events of which we are reading were not happening to people whose faith was strong and secure. They were happening to people whose faith had been assaulted so violently for so long that it was now hanging by a mere thread—weak and waning, they were on the verge of total unbelief.

- While Esther was locked up in the harem, we read that Mordecai was pacing back & forth each & **"every day"** outside (v11). As he watched the young woman he had taken as his own daughter face this tragedy, **he felt powerless, unable to do anything, unable to stop it, unable to rescue her...**
- *Have you been there? Have you been in Esther's shoes as a victim of evil? Have you been in Mordecai's shoes, powerless to help those you love?*
- **This is the real pain of the real world that has been utterly marred by sin and rebellion.** As I said at the beginning of this sermon, the Bible does not set up straw men. It faces the harshest and most wicked realities of life and then raises the probing question: **Where is God in the midst of all this?**
- **How is your own heart presently answering that question?** Do you believe that God is in control, working good for his chosen people even in the midst of their pain? Or, like Esther, do you think it is all up to you to *"win"* the things you need, to control the outcome by your own efforts?

III. The True King's Providence Perfected (Esther Enthroned) (v12-18)

v12-14 were written in such a way as to delicately explain the salacious nature of each abducted girl's night w/ the king w/o being graphic. (Read v12-14)

- In short, the women did not matter at all. It was all about the king's *"delight"* (v14). He used them like cheap playthings to satisfy his selfish lust.

Finally, in v15 when Esther's "turn came", she too, like all the others, was sexualized and mistreated in order to satisfy the king.

- **This is a tragedy.** It is a story of a young girl, orphaned in a strange land, ripped from her family, and abused by the powerful for personal pleasure.
- **We should not try to whitewash this situation as if it was not wholly evil.** Those who participated stand guilty before God for their actions.
- **When we say that God is sovereign over all things—including evil—we are not saying that God made them commit these sinful acts. That is false.**
- **No one made them commit these sins.** They did this evil of their own will. They freely chose to spurn the moral law of God written on their hearts.
- Yet, even so, God was sovereignly turning their evil intentions into the very means by which his good and holy will is accomplished for his people.
- **Esther, the Jew, though she was presently embarrassed to be such, was now queen of Persia. And though she did not yet know it, the very God whom she feared had abandoned and rejected her, was the God who had, in fact, chosen her to be his servant "for such a time as this".** (Esther 4:14)
- **Esther could not see it at this moment, but there was a great, holy, wise, loving, and redeeming purpose behind her present pain.**
- **And this is a truth which every child of God can cling to in every tragedy we may be called to face.** Even in the harem's of wretched kings, God is there, turning evil for good, working redemption through rebellion, and preserving his chosen people by his own merciful and mighty hand.

Yet, we might now ask: But why did it have to come through such injustice, through such pain, such evil & agony? Why did Esther have to suffer?

- First of all, we need to be honest and say: **We cannot fully answer all the 'why' questions of life.** God has not told us the answer to every **'why'.**
- **But we do know what the answer CANNOT be:** It *cannot* be that Esther suffered *because God didn't care*, or *because God is evil*, or *because God is indifferent*, or *because God didn't know what was going on*, or *because God didn't have the power to stop it.*
- Both the Bible and redemptive history both make it abundantly clear that none of these explanations could ever be the right answer.

What we can say to the question of 'why' Esther faced this suffering are these three reasons:

1. God used Esther's suffering for her own good. He used suffering to bring her own heart back to him in strong and devoted faith. (To Preserve Her From Unbelief)

- **Q:** When has your faith been strongest? **A:** In the midst of and on the other side of suffering. **God uses suffering to do much good to his children.**

2. God used Esther's suffering for the good of others. It was through this pain that Esther was positioned to be an instrument of salvation for others.

- God does the same with our suffering. What we suffer is used by God to both **prepare us** & **position us to be instruments of his mercy to others.**

3. God used Esther's suffering to foreshadow the greater suffering & greater salvation which would one day come through the work of Jesus Christ.

- If Esther had *not* been abducted & taken into the king's bed, she would *not* have become the queen she needed to be to rise in defense of her people.
- It was through her suffering that she was sovereignly positioned to provide the redemption God's people needed from their enemies.
- In the same way, if Christ had *not been betrayed, rejected, mocked, tortured, crucified, & killed*, he could *not* have provided our eternal salvation.
- It was through the suffering Jesus faced that he actually bore the wrath of God against us for our sin, paying our debts in full once and for all, so every scrap of condemnation against God's children would be forever taken away and that we could be forgiven and redeemed forevermore.

Application:

We must learn to view our lives with the eyes of faith—believing at all times that God is with us, for us, and working good in & through all we face.

