

Esther: Winning Favor
Chapter 2
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Welcome back to the book of Esther! Our narrative got off to a fast-paced, raucous start last week, which leads me to make one brief commercial break before we get started today: because this is a narrative, if you miss a week, I encourage you to read the chapters for that week—they're all listed in the bulletin—or to read the sermon which is posted on the website. I'll do only a brief recap to start each week, so it will be important to keep up with the story. With that, let's dig in.

You'll recall from last week that 187 days of royal feasting had ended in a personal-turned-political crisis. In what was meant to be the crowning moment of his extravagant banquet, King Ahasuerus had summoned Queen Vashti in order to show her off to his subjects. Her inexplicable royal defiance sent the king into a fit of rage, necessitating a hurriedly assembled conference of the palace advisors and resulting in an empire-wide decree ordering all women to honor their husbands. That brings us to:

Act II, Scene 1: When the curtain opens again, the mood in the palace is very different from the closing scene of chapter one. The lawyers and the secretaries are gone, along with the guests and the caterers, and the pomp and circumstance. Gone, too, is the king's anger. We don't know exactly how long it took him to cool down, but this scene has all the symptoms of the "morning after." For a brief moment, we see Ahasuerus as a man and not a king. He is lonely and depressed, contemplating a decision that seems to have left a very bad taste in his mouth.

To have the king "down in the dumps" simply won't do, so Ahasuerus is quickly surrounded by the royal valets who are eager to cheer him up, and they have a plan. Their proposal is anything but modest which is in keeping with the pattern of excess we have come to expect in this court. The attendants suggest that "beautiful young virgins" be rounded up throughout all 127 provinces of the kingdom and be brought into the safekeeping of one of the king's eunuchs, Hegai. After the women receive their requisite beauty treatments, the king can select Vashti's replacement from among them.

Once again we see the king, supposedly the man with absolute power in the kingdom, make a decision only after it has been prompted and arranged by

someone else. The valets' suggestion of special commissioners appeals to the royal penchant for bureaucracy and gives the whole scheme an "official" air. Without a moment's hesitation, the king acts. The servants' proposal seems to be a smashing success. In the space of a few sentences, Ahasuerus has been restored to his royal self.

Act II, Scene 2: The scene shifts abruptly in verse five, as the drama takes us beyond the walls of the palace and into the lives of two obscure Jews. For the first time we are introduced to the title character, Esther, and her cousin, Mordecai, who had adopted the orphaned Esther as his daughter. Two things of significance should be noted with the introduction of these two main characters. First, the narrator takes a good bit of trouble to establish Esther and Mordecai's family tree, tracing their lineage back several generations along the branch of Benjamin. King Saul was a Benjaminite whose father's name was Kish, just like Mordecai. The relevance of this connection will become clear next week as the rivalry between Mordecai and Haman the Agagite develops, since it reflects an ancient rivalry between Saul and King Agag.

Second, and more importantly, these two main characters highlight a major theme of the Book of Esther, that of identity and exile. Both Mordecai and Esther maintain dual identities because of their status as exiled Jews, which results in increased tension and danger. They will deal with those tensions and dangers differently, but they both reflect the common struggle of their people to live faithfully in an unfaithful culture which is one of the drama's main themes and one of the reasons this book has so much to say to our lives all these centuries later.

The parallel between Esther and the exiles is nowhere more apparent than in verse eight when she is taken captive. The verbs, you'll note, are in the passive which is critical. The girls "were gathered" and "were taken." Neither the virgins nor the Jews had any say in the matter of their captivity, and we need to keep this in mind as the story progresses. Just because Esther makes the best of a bad situation doesn't mean it is anything other than a bad situation.

Modern readers may be tempted to view this scene as an innocent beauty contest, but that would be a misleading comparison. For one thing, contestants in modern beauty pageants choose to participate. For another, they get to go home when it's over, some with scholarships and parting gifts. But there are no parting gifts for the women caught in this royal dragnet, and they do not get to go home. They go straight to the king's harem, and however luxurious their accommodations might be, it is still a poor substitute for freedom, family and home.

For Esther, the prospect of living in a pagan court as the concubine of a gentile king certainly looms large. She faces the possibility of being doubly violated, both as a woman and as a Jew. Mordecai clearly believes her Jewish identity places her at risk, yet in obeying him to hide who she truly is, she is being asked to relinquish the last obvious vestiges of her former identity. Mordecai, for his part, paces daily in front of the court of the harem, straining for word of Esther's safety.

This scene tells us a great deal about the character of both Esther and Mordecai. Mordecai emerges as a loyal Jew and a responsible father figure. Esther, for her part, is more than just a pretty face. She has a presence about her and also a winsomeness. Even under extremely trying circumstances, she stands out and wins the favor of those around her. Her worth is quickly recognized by Hegai who grants her special favor and promotes her to first place in the harem. Given the situation, it's fair to wonder whether Esther regards this as a blessing or a curse. As onlookers to the drama, it is another moment when we're not sure whether to laugh or cry.

Acts II, Scene 3: Twelve months is a long time to spend in the beauty parlor, but that's the length of time specified for the candidates' cosmetic treatments. This may well be another example of the excess of King Ahasuerus' court, but the point is to underscore the rigorous beauty regimen to which the women were subjected. Perhaps more important than the length of the process is the fact that it is described as a "law." The word is an important one in the book of Esther, being used to describe not only what was customary but also what was irrevocably decreed. The impression is that everything is being done decently and in good order. Somewhere in that court there must have a Presbyterian. Esther is subject to these laws and customs and complies with them as much as possible. Although at this point it is a small thing, this instance joins with others later in the narrative to form a general impression of obedience to Persian law. Later, when Haman accuses the Jews of not keeping the king's laws, this example of Esther's compliance will come back as an argument in her and her people's defense.

The narrator continues the description of the selection process, coming in verses 15-18 to Esther's turn. Up to this point, Esther has been a woman who was more acted upon than acting on her own behalf. Here we see her with her first opportunity to exercise her own will. Each girl is allowed to take one possession with her into the presence of the king. When offered the chance to take whatever she wants from the harem, Esther asks for "nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch...advised." Yet again, Esther distinguishes herself by her maturity and

wisdom. Who better than Hegei to know the king's preferences? Esther winsomeness is combined with considerable savvy and people skills.

Vs. 16 says that Esther “was admired by all who saw her,” so we’re hardly surprised to learn that “the king loved Esther more than all the other women.” The surprise is, instead, the level of tenderness that seems to be implied with words like “love,” “favor,” and “devotion.” Lest we forget the other aspects of Ahasuerus’s personality, however, the author adds a potentially ominous allusion to the fate of the former queen. Verse 17 concludes with the words, “he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.” No amount of royal language can disguise the risks inherent in Esther’s new role.

No coronation would be complete, of course, without a great banquet to celebrate the occasion, and as we would expect, Ahasuerus spares no expense. All his officials and ministers are invited, a holiday is declared in all the provinces and gifts are distributed with “royal liberality.” Esther’s introduction to the Persian people is wonderfully positive. In fact, her reputation has spread like wildfire in the space of just a few verses.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does it mean for us to maintain our identity as faithful Christians in a secular, unfaithful society? Like Esther, we generally obey the laws of the land, but are there lines in the sand that we need to draw, places we won’t go, attitudes we refuse to adopt, language we will not use? Are there ways in which we must choose principle over conformity, even if it results in exile (in all the many forms “exile” can take in our society?)
2. Another way to ask the question is: how is your life distinctively Christian? What identifies you as a follower of Jesus Christ? And if the truthful answer is nothing, or not much, what is that saying to you?
3. Esther is a beautiful example of the adage, “bloom where you’re planted.” She could have chosen bitterness, resentment, or despair in response to her circumstances, but she didn’t. Instead, even in what we might describe as being surrounded by the enemy, Esther chose to use all of her gifts and abilities and assets to the best advantage possible. She was clearly smart, savvy and wise. She had strength of character that stood out. She was also friendly and likeable. She had some people skills and she used them to good effect. She was willing to learn from others, like the eunuch Hegei, and to follow instructions. I think this has a lot to say about how we live out our faith. It is one thing to take seriously our call to be distinctly Christian, but that is not a license to be obnoxious, judgmental, or condemning of others.

Instead, how can we be both wise and winsome, faithful and engaging, distinctive yet inclusive?

4. As we noted last week, Esther is the only book in the Bible in which God's name is never specifically mentioned. Yet, we see in today's drama that God is clearly present. "Happy divine coincidences" occur throughout the book. But, they also occur throughout our lives, as well. The problem is that we are so often too busy, too distracted, too worried, too blinded by our own agendas to notice. In your life, especially if you are in the midst of difficulties, how is God present and how is God at work? Be alert, pay attention. God is with us.

Act II, Scene 4: There is an "out of the frying pan, into the fire" feel to the last scene in this chapter. Just when we begin to relax a bit about Esther's fate, we learn that a conspiracy has been hatched just outside the royal bedchamber. Two disgruntled eunuchs have planned to assassinate Ahasuerus. Although the king is the target, Esther is at risk as well. Even if she were not present for the assassination attempt itself, her status as queen would be seriously jeopardized in the midst of a palace coup.

Disaster is averted, however, by what we might call a "divine coincidence." Mordecai, who is now ensconced in a position of responsibility at the palace gate, gets wind of the plot and reports it to Queen Esther. Esther quickly reports it to the king, giving Mordecai all the credit. The treasonous eunuchs are executed and the incident duly recorded in the royal records, a detail that will turn out to have very significant implications later. Stay tuned.