



Esther 2:1-18  
 Esther: The God Behind Everything  
 “The Bachelor: Persian Style”

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Today we continue in our series on Esther. Just to briefly recap: Israel is under Persian rule. A large group of Israelites have been granted permission to return to Jerusalem and build the Temple, but many stayed behind. You’ll recall from last week that we saw Xerxes, King of Persia, agree with his advisors to banish his wife, Queen Vashti, from his presence and depose her as queen, when she refused to come and be paraded before a bunch of men. The other part of the decision that was made was to have a nation-wide open audition for who would be the next queen. So today we find out more about that, as we dive into **Esther 2**.

The book of Esther is very secular and worldly feeling – not unlike where we find ourselves in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. And we see that today as clearly as anywhere else in this book. So, even though it tells of events that happened some 2500 years ago, it’s pertinent to our lives and our culture as well. Now, these events take place in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> year of his reign – we know she was crowned as queen in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of his reign. He became king some time in 486 B.C. The events of chapter 1 were in the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of his reign, putting them in 484 B.C., or maybe into 483 B.C. We know from other historical documents that Persia went to war a couple years later to try and conquer Greece, and lost that war. So that war happened, essentially, in between chapters one and two.

Planning and preparing for that war and the carrying out of it undoubtedly took much time and effort for King Xerxes with all of his officials and military leaders so forth...historians say his military was somewhere between 1 million and 2 million men...so this was a huge endeavor...And after that loss, two things come crashing down on him. First, they lost, so that’s like a total bummer for him. He’s got to deal with that, and process it, regroup the kingdom, and so forth. Second of all, he has no wife to console him and be there for him in the midst of his own pain and grief. And obviously, it’s not that there aren’t other people in his life to do that, just as for any of us there are other people whether you’re married or not...but it can be lonely at the top.

So, there's no Vashti anymore, and now: **He really feels the consequences of his decision to banish her from his presence and depose her as queen.** In some ways, maybe for the first time he's really dealing with that, because the preparations for war and then the battle itself would have certainly distracted him for the intervening few years. So, chapter 2 gets at this when we read, "Later when his fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her" (verse 1). And on one hand, it sounds like quite soon after chapter one where he had great "fury" at her refusal to come to him and he made that decision in the midst of his fury. The Hebrew reads, "*After these things*, when his fury had subsided." What things are being referred to? Probably the events of chapter 1, but it could include other things – like the frustration and anger of losing a war.

In fact, there's then also this statement that he "remembered Vashti" and what she had done, and what he decreed about her...and it kind of sounds like it's quite a bit later; that more time has passed than just a good night's rest, or even a few days. Regardless, this verse is bridging the events of chapter 1 with what follows here in chapter 2. We're going from the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of his reign to the 6<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, and by the time we get to verse 18 it's now the 7<sup>th</sup> year of his reign.

So, a search is conducted throughout Persia, and a bunch of young ladies are brought to Susa where they will be under the care of a eunuch named Hegai (hay-gay), given beauty treatments, and given the opportunity to be crowned the next queen. **The narrative zeroes in on one of the contestants in particular: Esther.** We're introduced to her through a flashback of sorts, that explains about the man who has raised her, Mordecai, and how his great grandfather had been among those taken from Jerusalem in the exile. So, Mordecai is Jewish, and so is Esther, who's Hebrew name is Hadassah (Ha-deh-SAH), but is known simply as Esther.

Here we have the first few of what are several "coincidences" that happen in the book of Esther. **In these "coincidences," we see God at work, even as people exercise their free will.** Or in some cases, they do things against their free will – like being selected for this contest. We'll talk more about that in a

moment. But in Esther's case: she just happens to be the right age; she even lives there in Susa (though girls were brought from all over the kingdom) because of Mordecai's grandfather ending up there three generations earlier, and just happens to have been adopted by him...but this is her home town which is a huge advantage emotionally: It allows Mordecai to be close by which would be a measure of support and encouragement for her...perhaps he could even check in on her, or at least he can hear how she's doing based on reports from others in the citadel (Verse 11 tells us that he waits outside for news about her), *and* she just happens to be judged as worthy of being in this contest...which is no small coincidence itself. We might wonder whether the women who were chosen for the contest had a choice in whether or not they participated. Probably they had to enter the contest whether they wanted to or not, if a government official came knocking on their door (especially given the news about Vashtii and what happened to her when she defied the king's orders), though the text doesn't tell us. **Some were probably selected against their desires, while others were probably eager for the opportunity to be queen.**

Esther catches the eye of Hegai (hay-gay), the guy in charge of all the women, and he gives her special treatment including 7 attendants selected from the King's palace, and placed in the best room in the harem. Much is made by some authors of the fact that Esther doesn't reveal her identity as Jewish, with some people saying that if her nationality had been found out, she couldn't have become queen; that it would disqualify her. But the plan from the start was to search throughout all the provinces of Persia. So clearly, ethnicity was not *technically* a disqualifier. But keeping her Jewish identity secret was important as we'll see in chapter 3 where there is an anti-Jewish strain of thinking that plays a significant part in the events to come.

Regardless, she keeps her Israelite lineage hidden, which for someone who was born and raised there, really wouldn't have been all that difficult. Maybe even her ancestors had married outside of Jewish bloodlines, so perhaps she even had a Persian look to her.

We're given some information about the process in verses 12-14: the beauty treatments, a night spent with the king, and then returning to a different part

of the citadel and kept under the care of a different person. We might wonder, when it says that a potential queen spent a night with the king, does that mean sexual relations? That certainly seems to be the implication. It's presented in a veiled, PG way here, but I didn't read any author this week who said anything else. We certainly have a degree of cringing at this, especially when you consider that some of these women were probably there against their wishes. But for some, as I mentioned, the idea of being queen and getting all the material benefits that comes with that was probably alluring. But not for all of them. Maybe not for a lot of them, even. We really don't know. But this idea of the most intimate relations between a man a woman being part of a contest to be crowned as queen just doesn't seem right.

**And yet, we've got our own version of this today, in the television show, "The Bachelor."** It has been running for 25 years straight. That's really successful. And there is its spin-off, "The Bachelorette" as well, which has been running for 17 years. And then there's the new version, "The Bachelor in Paradise" that's been running for 7 years. They're all part of the same franchise, essentially. Plus there are other copy-cat shows that are all variations on a theme. Apparently, Americans – and other nationalities as these kinds of shows are all over the world – love this stuff.

But with many of them, including the Bachelor and the Bachelorette, it follows in the footsteps of King Xerxes and his process for finding a new queen. When they get down to the final three contestants, they get their night with the Bachelor or the Bachelorette. Here's a 2014 *Slate* article that talks about "The Bachelor": "There may be no show on television as twisted about sex as The Bachelor... **The show assembles a harem of attractive women who attempt to woo one man not just with their charm, but their bodies, their insecurity, and their willingness to suppress any part of their personality that might make them seem difficult—in particular, their innate discomfort that this man is availing himself of numerous other women as he speaks to each of them about feeling a 'real connection.'** ...To distract from the ickiness of this setup, The Bachelor plays the prude, only ever speaking of sex in the most coded, vague terms..."

So, we're not so different today, and that article from 2014 actually describes this 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. search for a new queen to a "T." They're even similar in how they present the sexual nature of it – in "coded, vague" language. So, this search for a queen is cringeworthy, but unfortunately our world is still just as cringeworthy – and maybe worse in some ways because we celebrate it and put it on the television for the world be entertained by it.

But, the result of it is that Esther is crowned the queen. She was given the chance in large part because of her God-given beauty, but she navigated the process with wisdom and skill and ends up with a crown on her head.

So, we've already touched on a couple things along the way here: the ungodly sexual ethics, and the "coincidences" about Esther's participation in the contest. I want to highlight one final one for us to take away that builds on that second one, and it is this: **No matter your background or your present state of being, God can put you in a position of influence for His purposes.** God still works behind the scenes to make unexpected things like this happen. It's tempting to say that "no matter your background, God can work through you for his purposes"...and that is true...but we haven't gotten to that part of the story; Esther hasn't done anything for God yet.

For the moment, we have this rags to riches story: she's not Persian, she's an orphan, she's raised by her cousin Mordecai...so the deck is stacked against her...and yet she ends up as queen of the land.. So: **The hand of God is seen in the so-called "coincidences" of her life that put her in the right place at the right time.** And she ends up in this position of influence. Let this inspire you, that no matter your background, no matter where you've been or where you are right now, God can put you in a better place. And that's true not just in this world, but in the one to come. God has done it through Jesus.

Jesus' life, death on the cross, and resurrection are much more visible than how God works here in Esther; but the *impact* of Jesus is just as hidden. Jesus' transformative work is all about our hearts. It's about what's on the inside. It shows up in external ways of course, just as Esther wore a visible crown on her head and had the title of "Queen." But how she got there is mysterious. Similarly, Jesus' work in our lives is "mysterious." The eternal

impact is mysterious. And because of what Jesus has done: **We go from our own “rags” to Jesus’ “riches” when we come to faith in him.** God takes us out of the muck and mire of our sin and He elevates us, giving us a new status, “child of God,” because we are “clothed in righteousness” that comes through Jesus. Certainly this impacts us here and now, and that may be visible in how we live our lives. But ultimately we gain the riches of heaven and an eternal kingdom – and that is an unseen, mysterious work of God. Jesus has taken care of everything that’s needed for that to happen. He’s done it all. Our part is to put our trust in Jesus. When we do that, we go from rags to riches – transformed and elevated in this life *and* in the life to come, made ready to be in God’s eternal presence by his unseen work.

So, Esther’s “rags to riches” story from some 2500 years ago is a preview of our own spiritual rags to riches story that God accomplishes through Jesus Christ. And it’s no less scandalous than this Persian version of “The Bachelor.” Jesus’ death is scandalous – he didn’t deserve the cross; it was because of us and our sin that he died on it – not because of anything he did...and we are not worthy of the effect that the cross of Christ has on us. But through it, God takes us from spiritual rags to spiritual riches. No beauty contest needed; just faith in Jesus and trusting - even when we can’t see it - trusting His work on the cross that continues to work in our lives today and into eternity. Let’s pray...Amen.