

Sermon 4: Esther 2:12-19: Esther Becomes Queens

OUTLINE

A queen's beauty
A queen's favor
A queen's marriage

INTRODUCTION

God's ways are not our ways, this familiar idea that comes from Isaiah 55:8, comes home with power as we look at the portion before us, Esther 2:12-19. Nearly every young girl has a dream to be a queen or a princess; Esther is living this dream but it is an anticlimactic thing. Every good rescue story needs a virtuous hero, Esther is sometimes noble and at other times her virtue is ambiguous. Every good story about liberation singles out a hard working; virtuous example we should be emulating for success, Esther gets ahead by God's providential working rather than any great deeds she does. Today we look at the rags to riches story of an orphan girl who becomes queen. We have seen the usual recipe for how this sort of story goes in the way in which America's Got Talent spins a sad story where a poor disadvantaged person by their own determination and hard work rise above their problems to succeed and conquer the world. But God's ways are not our ways. God not Esther is the hero of the book of Esther, where we are programmed to see in her the great hero we all need the details of the text are more realistic in terms of presenting an imperfect woman being used by a perfect God. Her actions are questionable God's outcomes are not. Her motives are mixed; God's promises are sure. Her performance is irregular; God's presence is a constant. We need to know that when we are weak He is strong; when we are faithless He remains faithful; and that He brings His perfect will to pass through imperfect vessels, drawing straight lines with crooked sticks.

We have met the king; we have seen him get rid of his past queen Vashti; we have seen him moping and trying to assuage the consequences of his actions by essentially stealing about 400 of the empire's most beautiful women, in search of a replacement queen. We have met Mordecai and Esther, Jews who have been living in Persia for too long, and who have become more integrated than not. Our narrative picks up with the year leading up to Esther being chosen as queen. If you want you can visualize this in terms of the America's Got Talent behind the scenes backstories that they give before a contestant wins the competition. Our text looks at three aspects of this rags-to-riches story of Esther becoming queen, these will be our three points. A queen's beauty, v12-14; a queen's favor, v15-17; and a queen's marriage v17-18. Perhaps with these points you would be expecting a Cinderella style romantic and sweet ascent; but our story is filled with all the realities of our fallenness but also the faithfulness of God.

A queen's beauty

God made female beauty as a good thing, as a gift that reflects His glory and to be a blessing to her husband. But as with all of God's gifts sin comes in and hijacks it, and these gifts become terrible burdens. Our text is a case in point. Men covet beauty, to own and control it, to define their own sense of importance by conquest and owning beautiful women. Esther was part of a beauty harvesting situation where these girls were taken from their homes and families,

and would be resigned to a life as a concubine. But our text begins with these women having to bear the burden of the then beauty industry, all for the sake of satisfying a selfish man. V12-13, 'Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to 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—¹³ when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.' In 2017 dark skinned women spent 432 million dollars on whitening products, a number that is increasing by 17 percent each year.¹ These young girls had to spend one year in beauty treatments for one night to impress the king. Many a young girl has dreamed of becoming a queen, but this would be no fun at all. The king however spared no expense to have these women present themselves to him at their best. Our verses focus on one of the more expensive treatments, the perfume treatments. Archeologists have recovered perfume burners that women used to treat themselves. Various oils were put into the burner and then a woman wearing a large gown would stand over the burner and try to catch all the fragrance so that it would perfume her skin, hair, clothing etc. 6 months would be spent using the expensive oil of myrrh and then 6 months using other spices and ointments. Rose and musk are some of the other fragrances that archeologists have uncovered.

On top of these arduous beauty treatments each woman was given whatever she wanted to impress the king for that one night audition. Perhaps she would set a menu; choose the entertainers for evening; do some reading; perhaps she would have some skill like juggling she would show off; and have to choose a wardrobe including jewelry. One commentator suggests that these would have been like a dowry and her possessions for the rest of her life long stay in the harem. She was denied nothing in order to please the king.

Our text goes on to describe what happened the next day, v14, '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.' She went from the house of virgins to the house of the concubines. She had one night to impress the king, to stand out from the world 400 most beautiful women and hope that he might remember your name and ask for you again. If you had a child by the king they would not be in line for the throne but would serve in the royal court somewhere.

Once again we cannot help but compare Ahasuerus to Christ. Both are kings, both are in search for a queen, both will make a rags to riches story where a woman who was taken not from royal stock would be made his bride. But the similarities are skin deep. Ahasuerus consumes all to gratify his loneliness and lust; but Christ on the other hand gives all. Ahasuerus seeks and takes beauty using it up selfishly; Christ surrounds Himself with the ugly not the beautiful and gives us the beauty of His own righteousness, taking our ugly sinfulness upon Himself. Ahasuerus uses up people's lives, using them up and casting them off if they do not satisfy; but Christ treats us differently, He comes at great cost to Himself; He gives life. John 10:10-11, 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.'¹¹ I am the good

¹ <https://theaggie.org/2018/01/18/burden-beauty-must-move-away-destructive-perspectives-valuing-women/>
accessed 27/10/2023

shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.’ Where Ahasuerus will use a woman once and if she does not please turn her away never to associate with her again; Christ rejects none who come to Him, He takes in the outcasts, the sinners, and makes them His bride. Sadly the picture of being enslaved in golden handcuffs, forced to undergo beautification in order to satisfy a narcissist only to not be good enough to be used up and tossed out and left with nothing is a metaphor for many of our lives. Ahasuerus, the richest and most powerful man in the world is nothing compared to Christ who calls all to come to Him and find life.

A queen’s favor

Our text moves from the general situation all the women found themselves in to the specific situation of Esther. Immediately it is clear that God is with her, that His blessing rests upon her and she gains favor wherever she goes. V15-17, ‘When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king’s eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. ¹⁶ And 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, ¹⁷ 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.’ Now Esther we have noted is a mixed bag, along with Mordecai. They have not commended themselves in the way in which Daniel and his friends did. They seem to have been fearful and faithless, but they are not all bad. Mordecai shows a right family concern in v11, and here we see Esther though the most beautiful woman present showing wisdom is taking advice and humility in not relying solely on her beauty to gain the king’s approval. Her humility and wisdom are to be commended.

Now we note that she gained favor, and doors were opened for her. In fact three times in this section we see that she won favor, v9, v15, and grace and favor with the king v17. This ‘favor’ is a regular feature among the exiles. This is not a favor that is earned because of her righteousness, but it is a gift of God as He works out His purposes in preserving His people. You will remember that Joseph gained favor with the jailor in Gen. 39:20-21, ‘And Joseph’s master took him and put him into the prison, the place where the king’s prisoners were confined, and he was there in prison. ²¹ But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.’ God used Joseph to save Israel. God gave Daniel favor, Daniel 1:9, ‘And God gave Daniel favor and compassion in the sight of the chief of the eunuchs.’ Nehemiah and Ezra gained favor and were used by God to preserve His people. God is doing the same here with Esther.

This is important for us, because our lives are filled with unearned blessings, and we are often put into situations where we have opened doors before us and have gained influence and favor. Should we think to ourselves like Esther could have, ‘O look at how awesome and righteous I am, God owes me these things because of my awesomeness.’? Or looking at how God is working in hidden ways in Esther’s life recognizes that God puts us into these positions to be blessing to others? Why does God grant us favor? Yes part of it is because He loves us and seeks for us to enjoy things for His glory. But we are all part of His greater plan; we are to think of our opportunities as a stewardship thinking about how we can

use any advancement or blessing to be a blessing for others. Esther could not see this yet, but we can. We are seeing doors swinging open in her life by God's hidden hand, setting her up so that she could use it to bless others. What opportunities do you have in your life that you should be thinking of in terms of blessing others?

A queen's marriage

V17-18, '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. ¹⁸ Then the king gave 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.' Many a young girl dreams of her wedding, her dress, the man of her dreams, his passionate love for her alone, and the happiness of that moment spent with family and friends. Although Esther may have had one of the most expensive weddings with thousands of guests with one of the biggest wedding feasts of the time, there is a shadow over this event. How much can a narcissistic king who is willing to bed 400 virgins love anyone else? Esther receives the crown that Vashti refused to wear but there are still all the other concubines in the picture. Esther may become a favorite concubine but what women wants to be loved in this way? It seems that Ahasuerus had some real affection for her, and that she may have come to have some feelings for him; but the language of 'grace and favor' is not language given to complete the love story arch, but to show that God has opened a door for the future preservation of his people. You and I are consumed with romance and personal satisfaction, Esther's story is not told to satisfy these questions we may have. The happily ever after of the book of Esther is not that these two found true love, which they probably did not; but that God's people are preserved. We need to be reminded of this because we forget that the bigger purpose of our own existence is as part of God's plan not to make our own personal dreams come true.

The other big shadow that hangs over this event is the matter of being unequally yoked together in marriage to an unbeliever. We have noted how Esther and Mordecai had not taken the necessary stands and now we see her marrying an unbeliever, more than that she is not a wife but a concubine, which is a legally binding union but without many of the rights of marriage. In the OT God's will of intermarriage was clear, regarding entering the promised land He says, Deut. 7:3-4, 'You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the Lord would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly.' The matter is not interracial marriage, Ruth was a believing Moabitess. The issue was one of faith. Of import to us is that in Esther day, Ezra had recently purged the Israelites of all their foreign wives and children. In Ezra 9 2-3 we see his reaction to the news that the newly returned Jews and priests had intermarried, 'For they have taken some of their daughters to be wives for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost.' ³ As soon as I heard this, I tore my garment and my cloak and pulled hair from my head and beard and sat appalled.' This led to national repentance and the act of putting away these wives and children through divorce, 10:11-12. When we come to the NT, we see continuities and discontinuities. It is still the case that Christians are only to marry other Christians 1 Cor. 7:39; but in the instance where someone finds

themselves in a situation where they are now married to an unbeliever, divorce is no longer required, nor get rid of the children 1 Cor. 7:12-14.

This is a matter worth addressing. We live in an age where Christians are an increasing minority, in a context where marriage is being sought after less and less. Some Christians may have the gift of celibacy, but many are providentially hindered and as a result are single. In desperation many young people sin and settle for a bad match; or go all the way and marry an unbeliever. This is sin and will often lead to much unhappiness. Many have rejected the biblical teaching on this point and entertained the devil's 'did God really say' way of equivocating on the matter and opening the door to sin. I want to share with you the words of one pastor's wife who has been involved in counselling couples for years and seen many instances of Christians settling and sinning in this matter. She has met many who now live with wounds and regrets, 'In the words of one woman who was married to a perfectly nice man who did not share her faith: "If you think you are lonely before you get married, it's nothing compared to how lonely you can be AFTER you are married!"'²

She talks about the three possible types of marriage that will result from this compromise:

- '1. In order to be more in sync with your spouse, the Christian will have to push Christ to the margins of his or her life. This may not involve actually repudiating the faith, but in matters such as devotional life, hospitality to believers (small group meetings, emergency hosting of people in need), missionary support, tithing, raising children in the faith, fellowship with other believers—those things will have to be minimized or avoided in order to preserve peace in the home.
2. Alternatively, if the believer in the marriage holds on to a robust Christian life and practice, the non-believing PARTNER will have to be marginalized. If he or she can't understand the point of Bible study and prayer, or missions trips, or hospitality, then he or she can't or won't participate alongside the believing spouse in those activities. The deep unity and oneness of a marriage cannot flourish when one partner cannot fully participate in the other person's most important commitments.
3. So either the marriage experiences stress and breaks up; or it experiences stress and stays together, achieving some kind of truce that involves one spouse or the other capitulating in some areas, but which leaves both parties feeling lonely and unhappy.'³

In the case of Esther God used her disobedience and turned it for good because He had a purpose to save His people. God does not promise good outcomes from your sinful mistakes in the same way. Sometimes the good that comes to us is the holiness and prayerfulness we learn from the difficulties we cause by our own hands. Just because God turned this situation around for good is not permission for you to go and sin and expect happy consequences. God does not approve of our sin, though He may turn it for better things.

Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus points us forward to our marriage to Christ. Where Ahasuerus tried to beautify and purify his bride from the outside with perfumes; Christ beautifies and purifies us with His own righteousness and by His Spirit. Esther's beauty will fade ours never will. Ahasuerus crowns Esther but for

² <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/dont-take-it-from-me-reasons-you-should-not-marry-an-unbeliever/> accessed 27/10/2023

³ Ibid.

how long?, Christ crowns us and makes us a royal priesthood forever. Esther wins the heart of a narcissist; Christ loves us with an everlasting love. Ahasuerus throws a feast and gives gifts because of his find in Esther, but this feast leaves a sour taste after stealing 400 of the empires most beautiful women to live as captives in his harem. Christ throws a feast when He brings us into His New Creation. The marriage supper of the Lamb is the greatest of all wedding feasts where the guests, who were God's enemies but now are adopted friends, are invited into the closest possible fellowship with God forever to enjoy all of the riches that have been made ours through marriage. Ahasuerus sought a beautiful bride and spared no expense in making her more ready to satisfy Him; Christ sought a sinful bride that rejected His love and spared no expense to save us and make us His own, where might find our greatest joy in Him.

God's ways are not our ways; God subverts our selfish dreams and magnifies His grace through the salvation we have received in Christ. More than that where sin seems so strong and able to be a fly in the ointment God is able to use imperfect servants to bring about His good purposes.