

Outward Beauty

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[0:00] Esther chapter 2, and I'll read the first 18 verses. Later, when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.

Then the king's personal attendants proposed, let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa.

Let them be placed under the care of Haggai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women, and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.

This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai, son of Jer, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiakim, king of Judah.

Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who is also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

[1:39] When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Haggai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Haggai, who had charge of the harem.

The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Before a girl's turn came to go into King Xerxes, she had to complete 12 months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women.

Six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king. Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.

[2:54] In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Sheazgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines.

She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

When the turn came for Esther, the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abahel, to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Haggai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the harem, suggested.

And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality.

[4:15] Please turn with me again in your Bibles to Esther, chapter 2, the book of Esther, chapter 2.

What sort of world is it where the most important mark of a man or a woman is their outward appearance?

What sort of society is it where a person is judged on their appearance and other factors like faith and attitude and intelligence and personality are far down the scale of importance, if they register at all?

What sort of society is it that lines its women up to decide which of them is the most beautiful? What sort of society is it where it seems advantageous to hide your identity as a follower of God?

What sort of society is it where there's tremendous pressure to conform to the standards of that society? Well, you say it's a superficial society.

[5:28] It's dangerous. It's a faith-testing place. Maybe you're confused at this point. Is he talking about the society in Esther's day or our own? Yes.

We're thousands of years removed from the Persian Empire, but our worlds aren't so different. They're not so different that when we read Esther, chapter 2, we don't see something of our own world in it.

And we do well to sit up and take notice of the similarities so that we're not doomed to repeat the mistakes of those who have gone before and live foolishly as those who have gone before us.

When you read Esther, chapter 1 and 2, you can't help but notice that all is not well in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire. We've seen that clearly in chapter 1 as King Xerxes, the great king of this great empire, is shown for what he is.

He's a self-absorbed, pompous, weak leader who doesn't have wisdom to rule his own house or his own empire.

[6:38] And that weakness is going to be put on display here in chapter 2 as we see the fallout of deposing Queen Vashti back when Xerxes and his advisors.

He did have some advisors. They just weren't very good ones. While they were under the influence, they make a foolish decree. And Xerxes has learned that a wife of noble character is her husband's crown, but a disgraceful wife is decay in his bones.

He's been disgraced by his wife. Now, he's really the disgraceful one, more so even than Vashti. But we see this leader's weakness, and we'll see more of it here.

What should they do now? There's no queen. He's gotten rid of the queen, and she can't come back by his own decree. And so, what to do? And you can almost know, just from reading chapter 1, that whatever they come up with in chapter 2, it's not going to be a good idea.

Because they haven't demonstrated any wisdom so far. So they conceive of this great search for the new queen. And that's what we want to see tonight, the search. We'll see the search conceived, the search carried out, and the search concluded.

[7:50] Three very simple things from our passage tonight. The search conceived, carried out, and concluded. When Xerxes had calmed down and presumably sobered up, the king remembered everything that had happened at the banquet.

He remembered that everything was going well, right up to the point where he decided to bring Vashti in to show her off. And when she refused, he got angry, and then he got stupid. And listening to his inebriated advisors, they got rid of her.

He decreed that the queen is gone, and she was gone for good. And now, the next day, the next couple of days, he's sobered up and he remembers. And he doesn't like what he remembers. He'd like his queen back.

He did like Vashti. And now he's sad that she's gone, it would seem. And there's a hint of regret here. Not just remembrance, but regret. And you can bet that the advisors are on pins and needles a little bit.

The king's going to be upset with us now because it was our idea to get rid of the queen in the first place. Now, he's the one that said it was a good idea and decreed it, but he might be upset with us. So they're eager to make him happy again.

[8:59] They're eager to get back on his good side. So let's come up with another plan, another good plan. And so the search is conceived. In the light of a new day, their old plan didn't look so good.

So they're going to try to come up with a new one. Let's find all the virgin young women in the land who are pleasing to the sight. Same thing that Vashti was. Same way that she's described back in chapter one.

Pleasing to the sight. She's beautiful. Lovely in appearance. Let's find all the virgins in the land that are pleasing to the sight. And let's bring them to the citadel of Susa.

And what you sort of start to get a picture of here. In the city of Susa, the citadel, a royal palace complex. There's the palace where the king lives, but then there's other buildings within the whole complex.

Maybe it's all walled in, but there's going to be servants' quarters. There's going to be a place for these advisors to live. We'll see that even Mordecai lives within the citadel of Susa. He's got some role in the land, in this palace complex.

[10:01] And also there's a house of women in the citadel. It's what is called here the harem. And we think of a harem as a thing, a collection of women. Here it's actually a place.

The house of women. And all of this here somewhere in the vicinity to where King Xerxes resides in his palace. All part of this complex. Let's bring him to the citadel. Let's put him in the house of women.

And there they'll be under the care of the eunuch Hegai, who is in charge of the women. Literally, he is the keeper of the women. He's got a title. It's an official title.

Keeper of the women. Does the fact that there's a position, keeper of the women, in this kingdom even need a comment? I mean, you begin to see why Xerxes doesn't have very good control over his own house.

He puts all his women in the charge of this guy over here, the keeper of the women. You take care of them. You keep them happy. And he expects them to jump when he calls. And when Vashti didn't jump, that's what ensues here.

[11:00] This great search for a new queen. So there's a keeper of the women. And so these young ladies would be drawn from Susa and then from all over. There's 127 provinces to draw on.

Probably a lot of beautiful young ladies out there. Not really an honor for these ladies to be chosen.

Yes, it might be nice to be thought of as beautiful, as attractive, as good looking.

It might be nice to dream about being the queen. But only one girl would get that honor. And for these girls to be chosen was to be chosen for a lifetime of really slavery in a way.

Or a lifetime of imprisonment. Being chosen by the king meant that all of your hopes and dreams and perhaps you were in love with another young man.

You've come along and been taken away from him. You have dreams of having a family and having children and of having a place in this empire. In the Persian empire, everything's at the king's disposal.

[12:00] If he says you're mine, then you're his. And so these young ladies, after they get there one night with the king, they don't get to go back to their life before this. They stay. Now they're the king's concubines.

And they don't ever get to go home again. Now there's a guarantee that they'll be cared for. They'll be fed. They'll be clothed. They'll have a place to live for the rest of their lives. But most wouldn't see it as such.

They'd see it as a lifetime of imprisonment. So it's not a good thing for these young ladies to be chosen. And then it says once they're in the house of women, we'll make sure they get their beauty treatments, their cosmetics.

We're going to talk more about that later. This is such a great chapter. It's so full of interesting little things. Cosmetics even. Something very relevant to our lives today. But anyway, once they're there, they'll get that.

And then winner take all. Whichever one is good in the eyes of the king will replace Vashti. The queen. And so just like the plan to get rid of Vashti was good in the king's eyes, so is this plan.

[13:05] And you'd think he'd stop. I think he's sober at this point. There's no indication that he's not. You'd think he'd stop and think for a minute. The last plan my advisors came up with didn't work out so well.

Now let's stop and think about this plan. Probably not a good idea. But his flesh takes over the idea of having all these young women all to himself. He gets his choice of them.

No doubt consumes him and his passions rule the day. And he says, let's do it. The advice appealed to the king. It was good in his eyes and he followed it.

He carried it out. And apparently this too is a decree. If you look down in chapter 8, when the king's order and edict, there's our law decree. He made a decree that all the young ladies were going to be gathered up to his royal palace complex.

And he began to wonder if this man's ever had an original thought. He seems to be more of a follower than a leader. Yes, it's good and wise to have advisors and to listen to their counsel. [14 : 04] But this man needs some new advisors. He needs some discernment, which he doesn't have. But the plan seemed good to him. Well, what about you? How's the plan seem to you? Some of you young men.

Some of you older men. It's a pleasing thought, perhaps. Get all the most beautiful women I get to pick. I hope it doesn't appeal to you.

But sadly, that's the way our society today still thinks. Does it sound good to you? Another question is, does it sound familiar to you? So-called reality TV is trying to find everything from the next great singer to the next great band to the next great model, the next great movie director, the next great boxer.

There's reality TV for everything. And do you know that there's even a show where they line up a whole bunch of beautiful women and they let a guy have his pick? And he eliminates them a few at a time until he's down to the last one.

The one that he wants and he can propose to her. And you begin to wonder if there's any difference between the days of the Persian Empire and our own days.

[15 : 18] You wonder if these advisors weren't sitting in on a planning session down at one of the network TV stations where they're brainstorming for ideas and they go, oh, I like that idea.

Yeah, that TV show. Let's go. Let's take that back to our empire. We can call it Persian Beauty, the quest for the king's new queen. And we've got reality TV, but it's not TV.

And it's real life. Our societies are so similar. It's troubling to me. That we would even think of such a thing and people would be entertained by it.

Well, the search is conceived then. It's ill-conceived, but it's conceived. But secondly, the search is carried out. The search executed. And before the author here can go on, he's got to introduce us to two people in verses 5 through 7.

Two significant characters that are going to figure largely in the rest of the story. And so we're going to pause to introduce them as well. The first is Mordecai. He's a Jew who's living in the citadel of Susa.

[16 : 24] And we learned something about his background. His family, at least, was among those who were first taken into exile by the Babylonians. We read about them this morning in Jeremiah chapter 29.

Jeremiah sends a letter to those that were first taken with Jehoiakim. And we read that here. And you can read it in Jeremiah chapter 29. And these were the people that were higher up in the Jewish kingdom.

These were the people that were close to the king. Artisans and craftsmen and other people that lived around the royal family in the Jewish nation back in Jerusalem. And so Mordecai's family probably had some fairly significant position in Jerusalem.

Now, this is probably a couple generations removed from Mordecai. He himself wouldn't have yet been born. But his family, one of his earlier descendants, or excuse me, one of his earlier fathers, one of his grandparents came over in the first exile from Jerusalem to Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar.

But Mordecai has remained in the land. He's a Jew living in Susa, which means he's one of the Jews of the diaspora, the scattering of the Jews after the Babylonian captivity.

[17 : 38] And he's had a chance to go back. Just remember that as we go along. Mordecai and his cousin had a chance to go back. The Persians had decreed that the Jews could go back to their land, but some stayed.

And Mordecai was one of those. But Mordecai had a relative. It's the daughter of his uncle, or in other words, his cousin. Hadassah. And he raised her as his own daughter since her parents died. And Hadassah has another name by which she's better known to us, and it's the name for which the book is named. And that name was Esther. In some ways, she's like Daniel and his three friends.

You remember that Daniel was his Hebrew name, and then his three friends were Hananiah and Azariah and Mishael. But they had pagan names as well. Daniel's was Belteshazzar. We don't know that one as well, but we know the three friends' names well.

Well, some of you kids, I think, might have learned about them in your Sunday school class this morning. Some of you very little ones that are my son's age. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They had two names.

[18:42] Their Hebrew name and their name that they were given in the pagan land. So it was with Hadassah. She's better known by her pagan name, Esther. And oh, by the way, she fits the criteria for what the king's looking for.

She's pleasing to the sight. They want young ladies that are pleasing to the sight. She is pleasing to the sight. But she's more than that. She's pleasing to the sight, and she's beautiful of form.

It's the same way that Joseph is described. He's handsome and of good form. Now, it means two different things, obviously, for a man and a woman. But she is beautiful, stunning.

She's exactly what the king is looking for. And so she'll be targeted in his search. And so we have to meet these two characters before we pick back up in the storyline. And the rest of the story is now that this search is going to be carried out.

The king's order and edict in verse 8 is proclaimed. Many girls were brought to the citadel under the care of Haggai. Esther, too, was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Haggai.

[19:47] No indication that she was wanting to be picked. It's a passive thing. She was taken by them. You're not putting yourself out there trying to be taken. Either she or Mordecai trying to get her in that position.

Except for her looking beautiful, it seems that she was innocent in this matter of being taken. But once she's in the house of women, once she's in the harem, Esther begins to disappoint.

It seems that she becomes active in trying to win their favor. She was good in the eyes of Haggai, this keeper of women.

If he had to pick a queen just on his initial impressions and maybe the first couple of days, if he had to pick the queen before Xerxes ever saw any of them, he would have picked Esther.

And so he gives her special treatment. She gets her cosmetics right away. She gets her special portions of food right away. She gets seven maids to herself. She gets the best room in the house of women.

[20:44] The best spot in the harem. And why is that? It's because in verse 9, she won his favor. It's active. Typically, you see a passive statement here.

She found favor, but that's not what the author says. She won his favor. She earned it. She worked hard to get it. Just as we'll see later, she wins the favor of everyone who saw her.

And she wins the favor of the queen. She's working hard to excel in this contest that the king is hosting. And so she gets all of this special treatment.

Interesting that they include portions of food here. Her special food. The ideal woman in those days isn't what's paraded before us today.

Stick skinny and bony even almost. They were a little bit... That wasn't the ideal back then. We'll leave it at that. And so they make sure these women are well fed.

[21:41] Well taken care of. And then we get another little insight here. She's earning favor. And all the while, she's hiding her identity as a Jew.

And we're a little bit disappointed again in Esther. Now, Mordecai had commanded her to do that. And she obeyed. And we see that Mordecai's got better control over his household than Xerxes does.

And that's well and good. But why do they hide their identity? Why do they not want anyone to know that they're the people of God? That they are Jews?

Would it have damaged their position in society? Would it have hurt Esther's chances at being queen? Would it bring persecution?

It doesn't say and so we can only speculate. But when it's coupled with Esther's trying to win favor. Winning favor with Haggai and the king.

[22:40] It seems a dangerous sign that Mordecai and Esther weren't doing a very good job of resisting the temptation to assimilate. To become like the culture and the world around them.

And that's troubling. They didn't, as we noted, return to the promised land when they had the chance. And now they're hiding their true identity as Jews and worshipers of God. And you remember back at the beginning we said there's going to be two dangers in a society.

Like the one we live in or the one they live in. One is to start to become like the world around us. To assimilate. The other is to despair and to wonder if God is ever going to deliver us.

If he's ever really going to send his son to come back and take us home. And it seems as though they're giving in to the temptation to assimilate. What is your tendency?

Is it to become like the world around you? Just to blend in. It's much easier to blend in. It's much easier to be like those around us. There's less pressure.

[23 : 41] There's less persecution. There's nobody laughing at you. You don't have to answer any difficult questions. And it's just easier to go with the flow. It makes you more popular. It makes you feel good because you're like everyone else.

It's very easy to become like the world around you and to hide your identity. Yeah, I'm a Christian, but I don't really want anybody to know about it. And we need Paul's exhortation that we heard this morning to stand firm.

This is troubling, especially when you compare Esther and Mordecai with Daniel and his three friends. Very similar situations. Living in exile. The one under the Babylonian empire and these under the Persian.

But both living in exile. But Daniel and his three friends. They don't take the king's food. They don't give in. They don't bow down and worship the image.

The three friends. And so they're thrown into the fiery furnace. Like some of you very young children heard about this morning. And Daniel refuses to pray to the king.

[24 : 42] He's thrown to the lions. And God protects them. But Mordecai and Esther are trying to protect themselves, it seems. By not standing firm. And hiding.

Ducking. Blending in with the culture around them. Don't give in to that temptation. This world is very much like theirs. It's our temptation to blend in. To not look any different than the world around us.

Don't give in. Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. Beloved brothers, I urge you as strangers and aliens.

Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles. Make sure that they know there's something different about you. Not hide it. Not. And sadly Esther and Mordecai hid it.

But coming back to the story. She's taken into the harem. Into the house of women. And she hides who she is. And notice verse 11. Another little side note here.

[25 : 42] Every day he, that's Mordecai, walked back and forth near the courtyard of the house of women. The harem. To find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. He had raised this girl. He was concerned for her welfare.

For her well-being. Then you're always telling you something good about Mordecai. And something good for you fathers. For us fathers to take note of. Do you make it a point to every day check on the well-being of your children.

And know what's happening with them. Know what's happening to them. For all of his faults, Mordecai, I think, had this right. Esther was like his daughter. And he was eminently concerned with her welfare.

Her well-being. He knew what was happening to her. He made sure, whatever it took, he found out what was going on with this one who is like a daughter to him. Could the same be said of us?

Do we know what's going on with our children? Do you know what's happening with them at school and their other activities? Right in your own home. Right under your own nose. And Mordecai's close relationship with Esther proves to be extremely valuable as the story moves on.

[26 : 44] He's earned her trust over these years. He's gained her confidence. She trusts this man and she knows that he's concerned for her welfare. Could the same be said of you and your children?

Have you earned their trust? So that when you do instruct them, they're glad to obey. Are you concerned for their welfare and their well-being each day?

And know what's going on in their lives. Mordecai did. And so ought we. And so the search is being carried out. All the women have been collected.

They're all now here in Sousa in the House of Women. But that's just the first part of the search. Now there's work to be done. They're beautiful to begin with, but we've got to make them more beautiful.

We've got to make them smell nice and we've got to get their skin just right. And so 12 months of beauty treatments. A year of cosmetics.

[27:46] You husbands think your wives take a while to get ready. Or you boys think your sisters take way too long in the bathroom in the morning. Try a year.

And then you can't complain. You won't have anything to say about your sister or your moms or your wives. How long it takes them to get ready. This isn't like a day at the spa.

It's like a year at the spa. It's treatments with oil of myrrh and then perfumes and cosmetics. That cosmetics, that beauty treatment seems to have some indication of scrapings or rubbings.

You think facial scrubs, mud packs, cleansing baths, whatever other silly things they do. I don't know what all of it is. And I know it's not all silly. But they were aiming over the course of the year to smell beautiful and to have their skin soft and smooth and without blemish.

It's sad to me that the only thing that's important to this king is the way that they look. And nothing else. There's no mention of classes in royal etiquette.

[28:56] There's no mention of spiritual development for these young ladies. There's no classes in the history of the kingdom. It's just all about how they look. It's so superficial. It's sickening. And again, I think that's just like the world that we live in today.

The thing that matters most is the way that we look. And the media entertainment just feeds that notion to us. And I know this was at Xerxes' command.

This wasn't these ladies' choice necessarily. But I hope you ladies here especially are more concerned with your heart than with your face. Now, there's nothing wrong with being beautiful and caring for the body that God has given you.

But if that's all that matters to you, then you've missed it. Are you as careful with your soul as you're careful to apply all three stages of your skin regimen thing that you do every day?

Are you cultivating those inward qualities of a gentle and quiet spirit which is of great worth in God's sight? Or are you only adorning yourself outwardly?

[30:01] Concerned for what others think of the way you look? I hope you have a concern for your heart. You spend all sorts of time making sure your body is well cared for. You look good. Do you spend time caring for your soul?

Making sure that you're being fed. Making sure that you're growing in grace. And your faith is being strengthened. Don't be consumed merely with the outward. But be concerned with the heart.

With the soul. But even then, the search is not over. And here's where it begins to get very uncomfortable even to talk about.

It's not just a beauty pageant. It's not just about looks. There's one more element to determining who will be queen. And that is that each one of these young ladies comes in for one night with the king.

And though it's not spelled out for us what takes place in that one night, it's really inescapable.

Once they've spent their night with the king, they go now back to the house of women.

[31:04] But this time to the keeper, not of the women, but the keeper of the concubines. And the concubines are those women in a king's household who had lesser status really than a wife.

But were available for sexual relations with the king. And could have children and so on. And so this king, Xerxes, taking one of them at a time each night, is making them his concubines.

And that's how it was done. You take them in. You lie with them. You sleep with them. And that's what was taking place with these young ladies. And most of them would never see him again.

They would go to the house of concubines. And unless they made a real impression on him, they wouldn't be called for again. If you remember their name, maybe they would be able to see the king again. But again, it would just be for another night like this.

This was all part of the process of deciding who would be queen in Persia. And it's just flat out troubling.

[32:13] It's disturbing. There's no other way to look at it. And I want to take it and apply it especially to you young ladies tonight. You girls, this is not how it has to be.

This is not how it should be. Now, we don't know what would have happened if one of those girls had refused to go to the king. We're simply not told. And there's not a record of any of them having refused.

And so we don't know what would have happened. But please, never feel coerced by a man, by a guy, into thinking that you need to sleep with him to prove your love.

A guy tells you, if you'll just kiss me, that will show you, show me that you really love me. And then it progresses. If you'll just let me touch you in this way, it will show your love.

There's nothing wrong with it. And there is something wrong with it. But if I say there's nothing wrong with it, it's just a demonstration of our love. And it progresses. And if you'll just let me sleep with you. And if that's all he's about, if that's all he's ever asking for, if that's all he's ever looking for, then he doesn't love you.

[33 : 19] That's all he wants. And once he gets it, you'll be like one of Xerxes' concubines, sent packing never to be seen by the king again. Or maybe kept around for a little while.

You'll just be another bragging right for him. And you'll be left with a broken heart and a scarred conscience. And so this is not how it should be, young ladies.

And don't ever let it be this way. God giving you grace. Don't give in to that pressure. You will regret it the rest of your life.

And for you guys, I hope I don't even need to say it. This is not how a man treats a woman. A man guards and protects a woman.

And for you, before you're married, that means guarding and protecting her virginity. A man would not let this happen to a woman. And so don't you ever make that mistake.

[34 : 29] Don't you ever go there. This business of a guy and a girl needing to live together before marriage to make sure they're compatible is hogwash. And it's sinful. The Persian Empire got it wrong.

And sadly, we're still getting it wrong today. May God keep us from such. May he keep us from getting it wrong. And you husbands, there's no contest going on to see who's going to be your next wife.

But the world is constantly parading before you their version of beautiful women trying to make you dissatisfied with the wife of your youth. Don't give in to that temptation.

Don't succumb to it. Don't be deceived into thinking, man, there's something better than this old woman that I've been married to for so long and I'm getting just a little bit tired of her. I'll rejoice in the wife of your youth.

Be satisfied at all times with her love. May God keep us from such perversion, from such sickness. It's troubling that we see this all around us.

[35 : 36] We must be guarded and kept from it by God's grace. And so the search is carried out. And then thirdly tonight, the search is concluded. Finally, Esther's turn comes.

And she doesn't decline to go into the king like we might wish she would have. And she wants to make the best of impressions on the king. She takes only what Haggai, the keeper of women, recommends.

Surely this man would know what the king wants. And so she follows his counsel. And as she's won the favor of everyone else in verse 15, she wins the favor of the king in verse 17 and finds approval more than any of the others.

And again, we're disappointed with really the heroine of this story. But she's flawed, isn't she? Disappointed with Esther. Esther, again, not knowing what the consequences for refusal would have been.

But could it have been worse than a fiery furnace or a den of lions? And we've seen other people of God stand up to such temptation.

[36 : 50] Different sort of temptation, but temptation nonetheless. But Esther goes to the king. She wins his favor. And verse 17 tells us that he loved her.

The king was attracted. The king loved Esther. We're a little bit skeptical about that. We believe that he's attracted to her. But does he love her? Probably not. We've seen his penchant for merely outward looks and treating his queen like an object.

But Esther definitely got his attention. And so he crowns her queen in place of Vashti some four years after she was deposed. This is the seventh year of the king. The banquet back in chapter one was during his third year.

And we're not sure what took so long. Well, there's at least a year of beauty treatments in there. And it would have taken a while to round him all up. And so maybe there's a couple years worth there. Perhaps the plan came later.

Some think that this is when he went off to Greece to try to conquer Greece with some time during this span. It doesn't matter. Four years later, she's crowned queen. And he throws Esther's banquet.

[37:53] And you wonder if there's just a little hint of fear. Is she going to stand me up like Vashti did? Is she going to refuse to appear? But Esther's a very different woman from Vashti. And she does come to the banquet.

And Esther has put him in such a good mood that he throws a holiday. Quite possibly indicated here in this word is tax relief. Cut him a tax break for that year. Gave gifts.

He fed them all again. And so he throws a big party because he's glad that he has a queen. And so we see this search. I conceived and carried out.

And now it's concluded. The search is done. The queen has been found. Esther is queen. And that, of course, will be very important for the rest of the story. But a few concluding thoughts about this ill-conceived search for the new queen.

I think there's great comfort here for us. Even in this mess of sin and wickedness. From the Persian king and all the people in the empire. And the disappointing sin of God's own people.

[38:55] Even in all this mess, we find that God's plan is not thwarted. Rather, all of this is part of God's plan. God isn't surprised by it.

Out of what we think are impossible circumstances, God brings great good. Just like he did with Judah and Tamar. Just like he did with David and Bathsheba. So he brings good out of this mess with Xerxes and Mordecai and Vashti and Esther.

And we'll meet Haman soon. God brings good from all of this. There's comfort there. That when we look around at the society around us. And we wonder what in the world is going on.

And how could any good come from this? To know that God is still on the throne. And that nothing is happening outside of his control. Ian Dugood says, God is sovereign even over those sinful choices and wasted opportunities.

That's comforting on a global scale. But it's comforting on an individual scale. Do you know that even though you've sinned. And sinned grievously. Maybe you've even had sex before marriage here tonight.

[40:04] Maybe you're carrying that burden around. Even something like that. God can still take your life. And turn you around.

And use you for great good in his kingdom. Look at the Apostle Paul. Persecutor of the church. And God takes him. And he says it. And he's one of the greatest apostles the church has known.

And Esther. This is a rocky start for our heroine. But God can take Esther. Esther. Who has fallen far short of the standard for God's people.

And he can still use her for great good in his kingdom. And so don't ever think that you're too far gone. That you're beyond God's reach. God's grace is greater than all our sin. The blood of Jesus can cover all of your sins.

All of your mistakes. And God can still take you. Broken, flawed vessel. And he can use you for good in his kingdom. God can do great good.

[41:05] Where we can't see any good coming from it. In our personal lives. And in our society. Take comfort in that tonight. We'll see that more clearly as the book of Esther unfolds.

That all of this is part of God's good and perfect plan. A second thing to note is that. God doesn't choose us because we're such good people. Esther is not an ideal champion.

She's flawed. Significantly so. She's giving in to the temptation to assimilate. She's working to earn the favor of Haggai and the king. She doesn't decline the night with the king. We probably wouldn't have chosen her to be one who would save God's people.

But it just goes to remind us that God's choice is of nothing in us. And good thing. Because if he was looking for somebody. I'm looking for somebody good.

He wouldn't find anyone. He certainly would not find me. And so how blessed we are that God's choice is of nothing in us.

[42:10] And we've begun to notice contrast with King Xerxes and our great God. And our Savior. And God's Son. And there's more contrast here. I'm glad that Jesus doesn't look for his bride the way Xerxes did.

I'm glad that he wasn't out looking for the best. And the most beautiful. Because again, he wouldn't have found me. He wouldn't have found any of us. There's nothing attractive about us.

We're just a bunch of dirty, filthy, wretched sinners. Nothing to claim for ourselves. And if God would look down and say, I'm going to find the most beautiful ones and make them the bride for my son.

Then there wouldn't have been a bride. If the bride of Christ had to start out beautiful, no bride. And so do you see what great love this Savior has for us?

That he would love us while we were unlovely. Before we had had any beauty treatments. And no natural beauty of our own. That he would love us. And that he would draw us in.

[43:15] Not just for a moment. And then to cast us aside and put us in a room where we'll never see him again. But draw us in for a lifetime. And then to make us beautiful. And not just for a year.

But to give us a lifelong process of making us more and more like a son. A process that's painful sometimes. It hurts to peel away old sins. And to scrape them off.

And to be done with it. And to put on the new man. And it's a lifelong process. But God is doing that work in us. He hasn't abandoned us. He hasn't just thrown us aside and said, good luck.

Make it on your own. He's walking every step of the way with us. And so he takes over every aspect of our life. And calls us to obedience. And a life of holiness. To follow him.

Again, Ian Dugan says, God's claims on our lives are absolute. He owns our bodies. Our sexuality. Our career plans. Our hopes. Our dreams. Our children. Everything we have and are.

[44:11] Is his to do with as he wills. And he's taking that. Everything that we have and are. And he's refining it. For his glory. And for our good. And we ought to delight in it.

Praise him for this sometimes painful beautification process. You know, this is the antidote to the temptation to assimilate. The culture around us pressing.

Pressing in on us. Wanting to make us like itself. God wants us to be like his son. He wants us to be different. And he's bringing that to pass in us. He's working it in us. And so there's great comfort for us tonight.

Who are God's children. Thank God that he has not left us to ourselves. But that he loved us while we were unlovely. And he's still searching. He's still calling sinners to himself.

He wants to add to the bride of Christ. He won't be done until the bridegroom comes again. And so there's still time for you to be part of that bride tonight. You too can be a child of God.

[45:07] You can come and trust in this glorious Savior. And know what it is to be made beautiful. To no longer be in love with your sin. But to be done with your sin. To put it off. And to be a follower of Christ.

And to be made perfect. You can find forgiveness. Your sins can be taken away and buried in the depths of the ocean. And they're forgotten. And it's a glorious Savior. It's done the work.

It's a glorious God that calls you. And he who called you is faithful. And so you can come to him.

And he won't cast you out. And so, dear people, there's a bridegroom waiting for us.

Here in our society that's so much like this one in Esther. We're being pressed on every side to be made like the world around us. But we look away from all of that.

And we fix our eyes on Jesus. The author and finisher of our faith. And know that he is going to come again. And he's going to take his bride home. And there will be no more struggle with sin.

[46:13] There will be no more temptation to be like the world around us. We will be like the glorious world around us. We'll be perfect in a sight.

And so there's the antidote to the temptation to despair. While we walk through this world and we're being pressured on every side, we don't have to despair because God has given us a sure hope in his Son.

And so we don't give up hope, but we press on, forgetting what is behind, and pressing forward to that which is ahead. Pressing on to likeness to our Savior.

Clinging to him. Clinging to his cross. May God take these things and press them home to our hearts tonight. May God guard us against being like the world around us. And may God guard us from despairing in the midst of this world.

Our Father, we thank you that you have included in your words stories. Stories that teach us. Stories that don't sugarcoat the truth.

[47:10] Stories that show things as they really are. And stories that point us forward, most importantly, to your Son. Our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Stories that move us forward in the history of your people. And bring us down to Christ, who is our only hope and Savior. We thank you for him tonight. We pray that you would give us grace to find our hope in him, that we might not despair.

Give us grace to find our strength in him, that we might be able to stand firm. Give some grace to find faith in him tonight for the first time. And then to walk a life of faith, trusting in him.

We thank you that you haven't left us to ourselves. We thank you that you chose us for nothing good in us. That you chose us in spite of what you saw in us. That you've made us your children and set us on the path that leads to glory.

Amen. We give you thanks and praise that you are a good and faithful God to watch over and provide for and preserve your people, even as you did in Esther's day. So you are doing today, watching over and keeping us.

[48 : 14] Fill us then with hearts of gratitude that would long to be more and more like our Savior, that would long to live according to the truths of your word. And so resist the temptations that abound around us.

We are not sufficient. We are not able to do these things in our own strength. And so we pray that you would give us strength this night. In Jesus' name, amen.