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Esther Crowned

Last week we studied Esther 1, the deposing of Vashti which sets the stage for the crowning of Esther tonight in Esther 2. We saw last week several providential occurrences that set the stage. Now when you think of how God sets the stage the way you are to think about it is that every man has a reason or reasons for the things that he does but God has another reason or reasons for the things that man does. For example, we said Vashti had her own reasons for refusing to come before the king and display her beauty but God's reason for the refusal was so that Memucan would make his proposal that would lead to the king issuing a royal edict banishing Vashti from his presence to prepare the way for Esther. Who could have ever guessed that these so-called "trivial details of life" would make much difference in the grand scheme of things? No one. So God was using the choices these people were making for His own ends. And it shows you that really, in the end, there is no such thing as a trivial detail of life. You may not see in the moment how what you do is important but God does see. And your responsibility is not to sit there and drive yourself batty by trying to figure it out; your responsibility is to recognize in hindsight that there are all these details God is working for His own ends and to rejoice in that, to celebrate the fact that God is the Lord of history, that even man does exactly what he wants to do but God brings about His own ends.

Now here we found in Esther 1 the events happened four years before Esther 2, so I call this the deep providence of God in that God is preparing things far back in history to set the stage. So obviously no one can see what's coming but we are to recognize and glorify God that He is doing this. So when we come into Esther 2:1 there have been four years between the chapters, for four years there has been no queen; the king, Xerxes, has been waging his campaign against Greece. Herodotus tells us he planned his campaign for

four years. The final six month planning session occurred at the banquet in Esther 1:3 in the year 483-482BC. So that's when the events of Esther 1 occurred. Xerxes was angry at the Greeks, in particular the Athenians for aiding Persian subjects in the Ionian Revolt more than a decade earlier. And when his father, Darius I tried to get revenge he was defeated at the Battle of Marathon and so revenge had yet to be had by the Persians and Xerxes was determined to get it. He set out on his campaign in 481BC. He had an army of 200,000, he had a large naval fleet; it was a massive campaign designed to accomplish total conquest and subjugation of the Greeks. There were five major battles. First, the battle of Thermopylae where Leonidas and 300 Spartans and 1000 Athenians collided at a narrow pass. Leonidas chose this strategic location in order to try and even the odds. The purpose was to protect the Greek army from certain annihilation. The plan was only partially successful as eventually the larger Persian army of Xerxes overwhelmed them. Second, the Battle of Artemisium was being waged the same day. When the Greeks heard about Leonidas' defeat they retreated from Artemisium. Third, the large fleet of Persian ships at Salamis was determined to take the Peloponnese. The Greeks did not know how they would defeat the much larger Persian navy. Themistocles decided to try and lure the Persian navy into the narrow straits at Artemisium. The lure was successful and when the Persian ships entered they were too close to maneuver well and the Greeks decisively defeated them. The fourth battle was at Mount Mycale in 479BC and the main Persian forces were defeated. The final battle came at Plataea where the Greeks and their allies joined one last time against the Persians and again defeated them and weakened their military greatly. This was the end of the campaign against the Greeks and the introduction to Esther 2. **After these things when the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided**, now because of the context the anger of King Ahasuerus here is not due to the loss against the Greeks but because of the events of Esther 1 regarding Vashti, although the losses in the campaign against the Greeks didn't help matters. But that sufficient time is intended in the statement **After these things when the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti** is apparent. The battles with the Greeks had kept his mind occupied, but now that he was back in his palace at Susa he had cooled off regarding Vashti's rebellion and **he remembered Vashti**. The Hebrew is *zakar* and means he was thinking about the fond memories of her and her beauty for she was beautiful (cf 1:11). And he also was thinking about **what she had done** which was her rebellion that day

almost four years before, and he also was thinking about **what had been decreed against her**, namely the royal decree of 1:19 where it was decreed that she may no longer come into the presence of the king. Now scholars will tell you that this decree did not mean she could never see the king again, but rather that she could never see him again as she had seen him before, namely, in her royal capacity as queen. And that would fit nicely with verse 2 because there will be a search for a new queen. So it appears that the decree against Vashti meant she could never be queen again. Especially when we have already seen that the laws of the Persians and Medes could not be repealed. So while the king was thinking of the fond memories of Vashti and really wanted her back there was nothing he could do.

So he was downcast and depressed so in verse 2, **the king's attendants, who served him, said**, "Let's have a beauty contest, **“Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king.”** They were tired of the king being downcast and so they are trying to cheer him up. How about Miss Persia contest according to verse 3. **Let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to the citadel of Susa, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai**, etc...etc...They suggest a kingdom wide beauty contest. Surely this would invigorate the king's harem. He already had a harem but some new additions to the harem might liven things up. They were to be **beautiful** according to the Persian standards of beauty but we are to think in terms of our own standards of beauty to get the impact. They were to be **young** in age and **virgins**. The Hebrew word **virgins** is *betulim* and technically means "of young marriageable age," usually a virgin but not always, we may suppose that they are probably virgins. But in any case young and beautiful.

It's going to be a kingdom wide search because he says **let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom**. There were 127 provinces and plenty of young beautiful virgins in all of them. The overseers would put on a local beauty contest and select the most beautiful two or three girls and send them to **Susa**. Josephus says that 400 virgins were brought.

Now they were to be brought **into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the women**. This man must have been the chief eunuch because there were others and he is said to be **in charge of the women**. Of course he was a **eunuch** because the king didn't want anyone

fooling around with the women in the royal house lest they try to form a royal line within the royal house.

So it was a kingdom wide Miss Persia beauty contest and those who won from their provinces would be brought **to the citadel of Susa** and given **cosmetics**. The Hebrew word **cosmetics** is *tamruq* and means to scrape or rub, this is beauty treatment consisting of oils rubbed in by massage. They were to be cleansed from all impurities by these beauty treatments.

Verse 4, **Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti.**” Herodotus says “the queen might be selected only from seven of the Noblest Persian families.” However, this **young lady** would not be from one of those seven families. And of all the **young ladies** the one who pleased the king, meaning she was the best of the best, she would be crowned **queen in place of Vashti** whose throne had been empty for four years.

And the matter pleased the king, meaning the proposal was sound, every king needs a queen and the fact he would have a display of beauty put on before him didn't bother him to much either, so **he did accordingly**.

Verse 5 and here we are introduced to Mordecai. **Now there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, 6who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the captives who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled.** Now the one who was taken into exile under Jeconiah was not Mordecai but Kish. Some people get confused and they say, well, obviously there is an error in the Bible here because if Mordecai went into exile under Jeconiah then he was 124 years old when these events occurred. But the nearest antecedent in verse 6 as the one **who had been taken into exile** is **Kish**, Mordecai's great grandfather. Now Kish was of the tribe of Benjamin and he lived in **Jerusalem** during the reign of Jeconiah, who is also known as Coniah and Jehoiachin. This king who ruled was a puppet king put on the throne by Nebuchadnezzar and who sat on the throne **of Judah** from 605BC -597BC. And the reason **Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon** came and exiled him was because he rebelled. So the exile of Kish occurred in 597BC and 2 Chronicles tells us 10,000 were taken captive in that exile, they went to Babylon. Now we don't know how this family got from

Babylon to Susa because Susa is 200 miles east of Babylon. But there is some story of this family's move from Babylon to Susa and so this is where **Mordecai** lived in 479BC. Now you might not think this is an important insight but it's a very important one for understanding why God's name is not mentioned in the book. Why do I say that? Because Mordecai was not aligning himself with God's covenant plan centering in the city of Jerusalem. We don't worry too much about geographical location because we're the Church and we can worship God from anywhere. But that's not the way it was for Israel. Israel had to worship God at Jerusalem. Three times a year they had to go up to Jerusalem and worship God. Was Mordecai doing that? No, he was not doing that. And the really striking thing is that he could have done that 50 years before the great Persian king Cyrus had given the Jews the right to return. Now Mordecai wasn't born at the time but his family didn't take that right to return, they didn't go and align themselves with the covenant plan of God in Jerusalem, Mordecai was now a grown man raising Esther and he didn't take that right to return. He could have but he didn't. And therefore Mordecai did not care about God and that I suggest is why God's name is not in the book. God is in the book of course, in an unseen, providential, behind the scenes way called providence. But that's the way God works for Israel when they are in unbelief like Mordecai. He's working for them but in a behind the scenes way and so His name goes unmentioned.

Verse 7, **He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother.** Esther had faced a tragedy at some point in her early years, both her father and mother had died and so it came to Mordecai to raise her. Like many Jews living among Gentiles she had two names. Remember Daniel and his three friends had beautiful Hebrew names and ugly Babylonian names? So Esther had two names too. Her Hebrew name is **Hadassah** and it means "myrtle." It refers to a famous tree native to Babylon, very beautiful tree, very fragrant, the Jews loved it so much they transplanted it to the land of Israel. And her parents named her after this tree. It became a symbol of the Jews living among the Gentiles. Her Persian name is **Esther** and it means "star." It's derived from the word Ishtar who was the pagan goddess of fertility from which we get Easter. Easter is a pagan holiday dedicated to the worship of the fertility goddess. And it got attached to Christ's resurrection because of the new birth concept of resurrection. But Christians really don't celebrate Easter, they celebrate the resurrection and that's a distinction you might want to keep in mind. So

those are her two names and her parents were dead and she's being raised by **Mordecai**.

And then we see something important in verse 7, **Now the young lady was beautiful of form and face...** Now the whole chapter is very sensual and fleshly. There is nothing here about how spiritual Esther is or how spiritual Mordecai is. You can find morality in the chapter but you can't find spirituality. And you have to keep those two distinct. Morality is not necessarily spirituality. It may be but it may not be. Unbelievers for example can be moral but they can't be spiritual. Now here we have a physical description of Esther, there was nothing she could do about it, this is the way she was born, and there's nothing wrong with being **beautiful**. It describes her as **beautiful of form and face**. Now form, that's the Hebrew *toar* and it means "her outline, her shape." So we know what her body looked like from the neck down, it was perfect, she had the perfect body. And also her **face**, she had the perfect face. So she was drop dead gorgeous we would say. In fact, the rabbi's held that Esther was one of the four most beautiful women in history along with Sarah, Rahab and Abigail. Josephus said that Esther surpassed all women in beauty in the entire habitable world! And there's nothing wrong with that, that's not the problem, it may become a problem but being beautiful isn't a problem.

Verse 8, **So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to the citadel of Susa into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women.** No surprise there, her physical appearance was stunning. So she's picked from the hometown, Susa was her hometown, she's the hometown favorite, as I said before. Josephus said there were 400 women brought to the king's palace and Esther is one of them. Now there's a debate here over whether Esther wanted to go into the king's harem or not. Within one century of these events Jewish authors paint Esther as not only being physically beautiful but spiritually virtuous; numerous Christian expositors have said the same. But this simply shows that they didn't understand the book of Esther. There is no indication that Esther did not want to enter the harem of a pagan king contrary to the law of Moses. Well, some people say, verse 8 says **Esther was taken to the king's palace** and this means she was taken against her will. However, the same verb is used in verse 15 for Mordecai taking her to raise

her as his daughter and this was not against his will. And the rest of the context points to the fact that Esther wanted to marry the king, she wanted to win the beauty contest and she won that hands down, now she wants to win the sex contest because that's what this is, it's a sex contest to see who can please the king the most.

Verse 9, **Now the young lady pleased him**, that's Hegai, the king's eunuch, she **pleased him and found favor with him**. How she pleased him we don't know but no doubt she pleased him physically, she was drop dead gorgeous, and no doubt she had good manners, which show that she was favorable to the whole proposition of entering the king's harem and possibly marrying him. And putting these two things together we see how she found favor with Hegai. So Hegai did something for her. **he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem**. So four things he did for her and he did these things quickly, which shows you there was a waiting time, there were lots of young ladies that had to be placed in the palace but Hegai got to Esther early on in the list. And the first thing **he provided her with** was **cosmetics**, this was her beauty treatment consisting of oils and massages that would prepare her for going in to the king. Second, he provided her with **food**, this would be the choice pagan food perhaps offered to idols at the Xoroastrian temples. And here we see that she showed no respect for God's dietary laws as Daniel and his three friends did. She's nothing like Daniel and yet God is going to save her and her people anyway, which shows you the reason God saved Daniel and his friends is different from the reason God saved Esther and her people. God saved Daniel and his friends because they consecrated themselves to God and did not budge. God saved Esther and her people because of His own covenant promises to Israel. So two different things going on in these two books. The third thing he provided her with was **seven choice maids**. These were the best so she's going to get the best treatment. And can you imagine seven people taking care of you. The treatment must have been extremely luxurious. And the fourth thing he provided for her was **the best place in the harem**. In Hegai's eyes Esther was considered the front runner from the very start

Verse 10, **Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make them known**.

Now again this does not paint Esther in a good light, some people say it does in that she obeyed **Mordecai**, but why did Mordecai instruct her not to make her Jewish identity known? We don't know. He had his own reasons but providentially God has other reasons as we'll find out.

Verse 11, **Every day Mordecai walked back and forth in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and how she fared.**

Apparently there was one side of the **court of the harem** that was accessible to the outside streets through a fence of some kind. And every day Mordecai came walking back and forth until he could get news regarding two things; first, **how Esther was**, this just refers to her well-being, second, **how she fared**, that is, what her position was in the harem. Was she a front runner or not? And Mordecai's curiosity on this point shows that his desire is that she do well and become the queen of this pagan king. Knowing that he had already been married, knowing that he had many extra-marital affairs, knowing that he had a harem of wives and concubines, knowing he was a pagan Zoroastrian worshipper, he wanted Esther to become the queen. And I say again, I do not see spirituality in here, I see some morality but this is not spirituality.

Verse 12, **Now when the turn of each young lady came to go in to King Ahasuerus**, see the women were taking turns, each one would go in and spend a night with the king, it's very pagan, it's very immoral, it's definitely not spiritual, it's sexual, girl after girl after girl, night after night after night. Now to get ready for the night there were **twelve months** of beautification each woman had to go through and it was divided in two halves. For the first half, **six months with oil of myrrh** and for the second half **six months with spices and the cosmetics for women**. Now the **oil of myrrh** is obvious, it's a perfumed oil derived from tree resin. But the **spices and cosmetics** are not as obvious. **Spices** are obvious but the **cosmetics** it has been shown refer to cosmetic burners that women used to fumigate themselves. "Women like Esther long, long ago, fumigated themselves, saturating their hair, skin, and pores with fumes from cosmetic burners." All this was part of the twelve month beauty school these girls went to.

And when they completed the school, verse 13, **the young lady would go in to the king in this way: anything that she desired was given to her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace**. In other words, they

were not instructed how to go into the king, they were allowed to choose whatever they wanted; whatever ornamentation, whatever jewelry, whatever apparel, anything they wanted they could take with them and go in to the king. Verse 14, **In the evening she would go in and in the morning she would return to the second harem, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not again go in to the king unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.** So they'd go out of the harem and never return, they'd be relocated with the concubines. Now the concubine was considered a true wife but of secondary rank, in reality she was nothing more than chattel. And once you were there you'd probably never see the king again **unless, unless the king delighted in her and** she summoned her **by name.** She would have to leave a lasting impression, something that made the king remember her and was sufficient temptation to have him summon her again. And so this is the sex contest.

Verse 15, **Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai who had taken her as his daughter, came to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the women, advised.** Now her **turn** may have been early on in the order if it depended on how quickly you got your cosmetics. But if the order was determined by the casting of lots then we really don't know. All we know is she didn't go first and so she's going **in to the king** who had slept with who knows how many girls night after night after night and it sounds pretty disgusting. But, apparently she wanted to go in and please the king because it says **she did not request anything except what Hegai, the king's eunuch advised.** And **Hegai** was the one who knew exactly what pleased the king. So why, if Esther did not want to be the wife of this pagan king, would she try to please him? Alright, so it's her **turn**, she requests only **what Hegai...advised**, and apparently it was not much because Esther's natural beauty didn't need any enhancement. She didn't need a lot of makeup or jewelry; she just needed to walk into the room. And so you can see the entire thing is a show of the body and the face, that's what's important to Xerxes, not the inner person of the heart.

And the end of verse 15 says, **And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her.** Before she went into the king everyone else recognized her

beauty. So, verse 16, **Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus to his royal palace in the tenth month which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign**, the seventh year was either 479 or 478BC, so that gives a date for these events. The chapter takes more than a year to unfold.

And verse 17, **The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.** Now the Hebrew for **loved** where it says **The king loved Esther** is *ahab*. There are three words for love in Hebrew. *Ahab* means elective love, a choice to love and it's the kind of love expressed before marriage, it's the love that says, I want to marry you but you're not married. So it's obvious she had sex with the king before marriage. Then you'd have *chesed* love and this is covenant love, this is marriage love, when you enter into a marriage you have entered into a covenant, that's *chesed* love, it's a loyal love. Third you have *dod* love and this is love that grows within marriage. So the word for love here is *ahab* and refers to a pre-marital love. And it says **she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins.** The expression means she was the best in comparison to **all the other virgins.** So much better was she that the king **set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.**

Verse 18, **Then the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his princes and his servants; he also made a holiday for the provinces and gave gifts according to the king's bounty.** It was a great celebration, with kingdom-wide repercussions. The expression **he made a holiday for the provinces** means "to give a rest" and we think that refers to a rest from taxation or a rest from military service or both. In any case there was kingdom-wide thanksgiving in honor of Esther and the king gave many gifts out of his royal treasury.

Verse 19, **When the virgins were gathered together the second time,** and we might surmise that some time has passed; it's difficult to tell what is happening here with this second gathering of virgins. He could be refreshing his harem once more or he could be having a parade where he shows off Esther's beauty in comparison to the other virgins or he could be sending these girls home. I don't know what this expression means but in any case it

does appear that some time has passed and **Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate**. Now the **king's gate** was where legal issues were discussed and judicial proceedings took place. So it's apparent that Mordecai holds some kind of position at the king's gate such that he's privy to all the legal issues that are going on in the kingdom.

Now how he got into this position we're not told but I suggest that Esther was instrumental in getting him into this position, and yet she was able to do it such that her identity as a Jew was not revealed. And looking at the whole chapter it appears that Esther and Mordecai had dreams of moving up the ladder into the royal house for their own purposes but God is moving them up the ladder into the royal house for His own purposes. One thing is clear, their purpose is not His purpose for they have engaged in several sinful means in order to achieve their standing.

Verse 20, **Esther had not yet made known her kindred or her people, even as Mordecai had commanded her; for Esther did what Mordecai told her as she had done when under his care**. And I think that note is placed in there so that we know Esther didn't unveil her identity in helping **Mordecai** move up into a position at the king's gate. And the fact that it says that **Esther** was loyal to **Mordecai** rather than loyal to the king shows that her real loyalty is to **Mordecai** and not the king. And that again is very telling that Esther and Mordecai are in this for themselves.

Verse 21, **In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus**. We're not told what they **became angry** about. Some have suggested it was the fact that Vashti would never hold the crown again since Esther was wearing it, we don't know, but they hatched a plot to assassinate the king.

But verse 22, **the plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name**. See, they're in it together. Mordecai helps Esther, Esther helps Mordecai, we have a nice family arrangement here, I'll rub your back if you rub mine, and they're working together to move up in the royal house at any chance they get. And it

just happened that **the plot became known to Mordecai**, see, it was just by chance...or was it...

Verse 23, Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence. So the royal police did an investigation, they interrogated these two chaps and sure enough they were plotting to assassinate the king and so they were hanged on the gallows in the same way that Haman will later be hanged on the gallows (cf 7:10). apparently that's how the Persians liked to execute criminals, it was swift justice. And the king has this written down. In fact, Xerxes was famous for having any act of loyalty to him written down. Herodotus writes that, "whenever he saw any of his captains perform any worthy exploit he inquired concerning him; and the man's name was taken down by the scribes, together with the names of his father and his city" (8.90). Evidently he didn't want to forget who these men were and what service they provided him so he could reward them accordingly. But we know that Mordecai was not rewarded at this time even though the king many have intended it, but that's how the plot thickens.

Alright, in conclusion, what can we learn tonight about God's providence, at least three things. First, Mordecai's commandment that Esther conceal her identity was for his own purposes, maybe he thought it would count against her, but God's purpose was so that ultimately it would be revealed only after the fact when the king loved her and it would be the undoing of Haman and the salvation of the Jews. Second, Esther's desire to be the queen was for her own reasons, but God's purpose was that she would be in a position of influence to stand up for the Jews. Third, Mordecai was at the gate for his own purposes, but God had a purpose of his own, so that he would overhear a plot to assassinate the king which would eventually work out for Mordecai's exaltation when Haman's plot to destroy the Jews was found out and provision made for Jews to defend themselves.

Of course, Esther's beauty was given to her by God and there is nothing wrong with beauty. But I do think that the way she used her beauty and her desire to enter the harem and her desire to spend a night with the king are all sinful. And yet God was able to use her sinful actions to bring about a good purpose. This is an astonishing conclusion. God is able to even work through sinful actions to bring about a good result, namely, the salvation of

the Jews. This does not mean that God sinned or God caused her to sin, she was doing exactly what she wanted to do. It means though that God was able to use her sinful actions for His good purpose, namely to keep up His promises made to the Jewish people. The book is about God's integrity to His promises despite individual Jews and their failures or successes. God is going to keep His promises. He is loyal to His covenants. He has integrity!

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