

## "Between Two Worlds"

**Esther 1:1 - 2:20**

<sup>1</sup> Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, <sup>2</sup> in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the capital, <sup>3</sup> in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, <sup>4</sup> while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. <sup>5</sup> And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa, the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. <sup>6</sup> There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. <sup>7</sup> Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. <sup>8</sup> And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. <sup>9</sup> Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

<sup>10</sup> On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, <sup>11</sup> to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. <sup>12</sup> But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

<sup>13</sup> Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, <sup>14</sup> the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): <sup>15</sup> "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?" <sup>16</sup> Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. <sup>17</sup> For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' <sup>18</sup> This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. <sup>19</sup> If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. <sup>20</sup> So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." <sup>21</sup> This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. <sup>22</sup> He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

**2:1** After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. <sup>2</sup> Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. <sup>3</sup> And let the king

appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the capital, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. <sup>4</sup> And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

<sup>5</sup> Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, <sup>6</sup> who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. <sup>7</sup> He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. <sup>8</sup> So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. <sup>9</sup> And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. <sup>10</sup> Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. <sup>11</sup> And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

<sup>12</sup> 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--<sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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. <sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.

<sup>19</sup> Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. <sup>20</sup> Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. (ESV)

Esther is one of the most enjoyable, and frankly (though I don't think you'll see it this week) one of the *funniest* books in the Bible.

During a service, we can only cover so much, so I encourage you to read the book of Esther this week in a single sitting. The scholar Karen Jobes says that you need to think of Esther this way – it's like a parable that makes its point as a whole unit. That means that our series is going to be difficult.

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Because when we look at just the first two chapters today, the point of the parable will in some sense be lost. But I think you'll see the *whole* story through the themes we touch on each week.

Let me show you what I mean.

Esther was a powerful woman. She rose to the top of her profession. She faced head on, and helped to avert the genocide of her people. She became rich beyond her wildest dreams. Beauty may have been her way of getting her foot in the door, but she achieved great things without the advantages of aristocratic birth, well-placed friends, inherited wealth or social prestige. In fact, she did all of what she did as an outcast or an outsider.

So the temptation has been – especially when you go through the book chapter by chapter where you don't see the whole – to focus on *how* Esther did what she did. To ask, "How can *I* become powerful like Esther became powerful?" To read Esther the way you might read Hillary Clinton's autobiography, *Living History*, or publisher Katherine Graham's *Personal History*. Esther as first lady or Esther as CEO. People do this all the time. Some people read David's story that way – David as the prototypical CEO.

But if we do that – if we look at Esther as the first feminist, Esther as the politician par excellence, or even Esther as a role model – we would miss the point of the whole book.

In fact, consider this: Esther is a failure as a moral example. To follow Esther would be to fall INTO sin – read the whole book (spoilers alert). Unlike someone like Daniel, when Esther is taken into the court of the pagan king, she will show no concern for her Jewish purity and dietary laws. In fact, she *conceals* her Jewish identity. And she will lose her virginity in the bed of an uncircumcised gentile to whom she is not married. And then she marries an unbeliever. She does none of these things for her people. She just... does them...

Even when Esther later will risk her life by asking for a meeting with the king, she only does it after Mordecai points out that she herself won't avoid harm if she sits around and does nothing. And how about this – when Esther hears of the great reversal of fortune – that the Jews have killed 500 people – she asks that the massacre go on for an *extra day* to make sure the bodies of Haman's 10 sons would be impaled in the city gates. 300 more gentiles died on that extra day – not exactly an example of grace!

I said the book was funny. So far that view probably sounds pretty twisted! We'll see! So what is the book about? Let's try to answer this by asking 2 questions:

- Is God is there in spite of appearances?
- Where do you go in a culture that is focused on nothing but appearances?

**So first, is God there in spite of appearances?**

John Calvin never preached on *Esther*, nor is it among his commentaries. Luther denounced the book as having "too many heathen unnaturalities." But *that's* the irony. People didn't want to preach this book, people didn't want to think this book was canonical, because God's name

wasn't in it. There is no mention of scripture, or prayer or prophecy in the book... when the truth is that *in* God's providence, he has put the book of *Esther* into holy scripture precisely to show that he is the God of providence! God is everywhere. In *Esther*, God is *conspicuous by his absence!*

He is active. He is all-powerful. *Esther* is a parable that tells us that there is not one rogue atom in the entire universe. Nothing happens outside of God's care, will, oversight or providence. He is the I AM, and he is the I'M THERE.

And the writer of *Esther* wants you to know exactly that. I may CALL this a parable, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen. In fact, it did! It begins, "Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia..." In other words, it happened. This is real. You can date these events to a specific time.

And at this time Ahasuerus, is putting on the party to end all parties. And maybe that's fitting. Because he is the most powerful ruler in the world. If we just use present day locations to explain the size of his kingdom, we would say that his kingdom stretched from Ethiopia and Libya in northeast Africa, up to Turkey and west to Greece and Bulgaria, north to Romanian and into what is now the Ukraine. It included the countries of Israel, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan, Pakistan and over to India.

This was an enormous empire. But what's the point of a big empire if you can't show it off? The king has a need to impress the leaders of all of the provinces that he ruled. So he hosts these leaders for 6 months – showing off his power, the opulence of his palace, and finally he caps it off with a banquet that lasts 7 days.

I have to admit, I would liked to have been there. Foods from Egypt and from India, wine that came from the royal vineyards, the best entertainment in the kingdom – all that the world has to offer in the way of pleasure.

So how did *Esther* – this Jewish girl – come to live so close to the seat of the king's power?

Well, Israel had been sent into exile by God. The Bible says that Israel had worshipped other gods, wanted to be like and enjoyed the pleasures of other nations... So God gave them over to that – he sent them into exile to fulfill the covenant curse for disobedience and sin, and to give the people what they wanted. God raised up one of those nations – Babylon – to conquer Israel, and the Babylonians took the remnant of people back with them to their home to be their slaves.<sup>1</sup> But then Babylon itself was conquered by the Persians.

Now what you have to understand is that the Jews saw themselves as the inheritors of a great nation. They worshipped the one true God. They had the law. They were on their way to being as God had promised – as numerous as the sands on the seashore or the stars in the sky. And now... it was in their face that in God's discipline of them, every day they were under the yoke

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<sup>1</sup> *Esther* appears to fall, chronologically, somewhere between Daniel, and Ezra/Nehemiah, where that remnant is led back.

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of *another* king. Every day his palace, *his* temple to himself, was in their face. Every day, they felt small because they were scattered and enslaved.

***Were God's promises still good?*** "God's promise to deliver his people will stand forever." Will God direct their steps to fulfill his promises? Are God's promises for such a time and place as this?

**The answer is – and it's all over this parable by his absence – God is there in spite of appearances. God is working, God is delivering even when you don't see him!**

One of my former OT professors has a rather sardonic sense of humor. He posted the following on Facebook on Wednesday night: "Proofs that God, if he exists, is either not all-good or not all-powerful; (1) Ice Dancing. (2) More snow on the way. (3) the Grocery store ran out of Entenmann's."

Spoken just like a true, Jewish diaspora. "We can't see God in this, so this is why he either isn't around, or isn't good, or doesn't have the power to fulfill his promise and save us from more ice dancing, or being stuck like Esther in a kingdom that knows nothing of God. Is God present in this?"

Many hundreds of years later, there was a King who was a habitual drunkard. He had many addictions, which you shouldn't mention in Sunday worship. As King of England, he married off his children at his convenience to serve whatever was his foreign policy at the time. He drained the royal treasury to suit his taste for wine, food and women. A biographer called him a "coarse, drunken buffoon" and a "contemptible coward" who was about as *unkingly* a king as one could imagine.

This man of debauchery was the man that God used to assemble a group of scholars to put together the most well distributed translation of his word ever produced, and one which would change the western world. This man was King James I. God was there. God was working even through that depraved king.

Now is this... heresy? That we would say that God IS present in a brothel or a bar?

Can we really get away with saying this? That in a book where there is no mention of God, that God IS there? That God DOES ordain that a girl like Esther, willing to ignore all food and purity laws, who would act as if she were married with a man to whom she was NOT married, to be the one to save his people. Can we really say, "He is there, and he *put* her in this position?"

We have to. Because we have no other choice. Because WE could not be saved if this wasn't so. You see, that king's party was OUR party:

Turn for just a minute over to Ephesians 2. The apostle Paul writes, starting at verse 1:

"And ***you*** were dead in the trespasses and sins in which ***you*** once walked, following the course of this world...." Paul is speaking to the entire Ephesian church about their past lives – their

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lives before they were Christians. "Remember," Paul says, "what *you* used to do!" But then look at verse 3, how the pronoun changes: "among whom *we all* once lived in the passions of *our* flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, *like the rest of mankind.*"

Paul looks at the world – looks at the party that the world offers each and every day – and says, "We used to have that party! We used to have hearts exactly like that."

Friends, you may not have a palace, or week-long banquets, or a harem. But of course, *you have*, and some of us still do. Some of us are caught up in behaviors that have gone on a week at a time, where our preference is that God would be absent so that we can party. It could be a party of the mind, the soul, or the body. We may not have a harem... but our minds, our hard drives, are full of harems. We may not have banquets, but many of our refrigerators are loaded, and we live in a culture that has turned food into entertainment, or an obsession. We want "in" on the world's party.

And let me just say, for those of you who are looking over at the students, and you think I must be talking about them, because "I don't party. I'm not flaunting myself. I'm not drunk..." A guy I know, a pastor, was on the phone with his daughter at college a while back, and it was 11:30 at night. And he asked her "What's up?" And she said, "I'm all done with my paper and my studying, so we're going into town." And her father said, "What!?!? Are you crazy? It's almost midnight. It's a school night!" (have you ever noticed that dads always round off the time to "midnight?")

But he called her back the next day. And he apologized. Not because his wanting her to stay back at her room and get some rest was unwise – it WAS wise. But he apologized for his tone, which communicated that HE would never have done that. That he had judged her. Because he said, "The fact is, I'm just too old to remember that I did exactly the same thing!"

Friends, there are two worlds out there. There is the kingdom of Ahasuerus, and the kingdom of God. And we think as we look at non-Christians that they do things, they think things, they desire things, that we would never do, think or desire. Or as if the *potential* to think those things were not in us. And when we do that, the world has a right to shut us out.

One of my preaching mentors – a guy named John Sartelle – he says that he would rather spend time with an honest, depraved pagan, than he would a lilywhite church member who lives in a sterilized world where he or she denies any potential to be anything BUT holy. Some of us feel this way and we feel bad about it... except that this is exactly how Christ felt. Jesus spent more time with people who *knew* they were awful sinners than with Pharisees who pretended to be lilywhite, but were hypocrites. We are all having parties in our minds, all the time! This is why Jesus says in his sermon on the mount, "that if you simply look at another with a lustful *thought* or *desire* – if you have that party in your mind – you've committed adultery."

A few of you may know of John Reisinger. John is a great preacher, for a Baptist. Seriously, I would love to have John preach here at Hope. He is one of the great reformed Baptist preachers.

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John was not always a Christian. He certainly wasn't always a Baptist minister. In his younger years, John was in the Navy in the second World War. He was stationed out in the South Pacific, and by his own admission, he lived a wild life. We may call them "the greatest generation," but John would say he was known by all of his buddies for running the show when it came to ungodly and awful activities.

When John came home from the war, it was his brother Ernie Riesinger who told him about Christ, and soon John himself became a Christian, and then a few years later went off to seminary, and then became a Baptist minister.

One day he was in the post office to pick up a package. He was standing in line when he heard a familiar voice behind him say, "John Reisinger, you old blankety-blankety-blank!" And he turned around to find his closest buddy, with whom he had ripped up one side of the south pacific theater and down the other. And this man said, "Hey John, I found this great bar in your town! Let's start there and you can lead us the rest of the way, just like old times."

John tried to change the subject – tried to ask his old friend about his life, his family – but it didn't work. He wanted to get to the fun. And so John had to say, "Look, I became a Christian. I like a drink now and then, but I can't do what you want me to do." And the old friend just laughed at John. He said, "You were always the prankster – what a joke! Let's go." So John said, "No really, in fact I'm a Baptist minister."

John Reisinger said that this man was so incredulous that he had to take him down the street, past the bar, and show him his name on the sign in front of the church building before the man would believe him.

Friends, the point is, God is there. God was in the South Pacific. God was working through John's brother. God was in the Post Office. God was working through John to reach his friend. Because if he isn't there – including all of those places John Reisinger would now like to forget, none of us have any hope.

You may think you never dove into and immersed yourself into sin the way that John did, but you had the heart to do it. The potential is there. And if you still don't see it, you'll never know the grace this God offers. *That's* why he's at this banquet. *That's* why he is with Esther when she is "taken to King Ahasuerus...in the tenth month... in the seventh year of his reign." He is there to *save*. God's absence is never true. His silence is not absence, his hiddenness is not abandonment. He's always there. *That's* our first point.

Now finally. What DO you do in a world that is focused on nothing BUT appearances?

What do we mean by this? Culture is King here in Persia. Make no mistake: You see, Esther and her uncle Mordecai are a religious minority in a society which had a morality that was at extreme variance from theirs. John Riesinger could take his old Navy buddy down the street to his church, but Mordecai and Esther had *no* place of worship. The temple was gone.

Now this is subtle. But the bible says that if you are not worshipping God, you will worship something else. If your focus is not on the glory of God, your focus will most likely be on glorifying yourself. You see it in the story of Adam and Eve, and you saw it in the false teachers these last couple of months in 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy. We will either worship God or something else – and that something else is usually tied to who we want to be.

Look at the King's banquet. Why did it last 180 days? The point was to show these underlings his power. His glory. And so he is showing all of his wealth to all who are there. And it takes 180 days to do it!

Now this banquet isn't the only thing that takes a long time, is it? In chapter 2, Esther and all of the other women have to get ready to be paraded in front of the King. (I like to picture King Ahasuerus as Simon Cowell.) Now did you notice how long it took to do their make-up? Chapter 2, verse 12: "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..."

So think about that. In Persian culture, the most important attribute about a man was his wealth and power. For a woman, it was her physical beauty and sexual appeal.

My how times have changed.

Of course, they haven't.

And you see, the parable of Esther is completely relevant. The parable says, "Who you are on the outside matters more than the inside. Your weight, your dress size, your wallet width, the color of your hair, your body type – in this world – matters more than what's on the inside.

Esther and King Ahasuerus, at this point, are playing the same game. They get what they want through appearances. And we believe it, too. This crosses gender lines, nationalities, religious upbringing, and crosses the centuries. Sure, the standard of beauty then was certainly different now, as was the standard of wealth (You don't exactly show off today by saying you own a cattle on a thousand hills). BUT, the point is the same – you have to make yourself presentable. You need the world's beauty-treatments. Forget 12 months of beautifying – some of us have spent our whole lives trying to be presentable and attractive and wealthy enough. WE believe that the outside matters more than the inside.

I can't spend too much time on this, and yet we need to be careful. Have you ever wondered WHY something like an eating disorder is so hard to stop, cure or change?

Ask anyone who's had this. We treat it like it's a skin disease. But it never starts that way. It starts out innocuously enough. It starts slow. We want to look different or control how we feel about ourselves. And it works in a very sophisticated way. It makes you feel independent and in control. Then, once it gets bad, people will tell you – if it's anorexia – how poorly you look. But you think THEY are foolish even while they think YOU are foolish.

You've just become like King Ahasuerus. You're like the king who wears no clothes. Everyone can see your problem, but you don't.

Why? Because what started as a problem of the outside is really a problem of your inside. What looked like a body issue, is really a deep heart problem. You're using *yourself* to become acceptable, and it just doesn't work. You can never live up to your own expectations.

All of us are affected by this. Karen Jobes puts it like this: In what way are each of us an Esther? In what way are you and I concubines of the world? Are you selling your soul for a night with the kings of this world? *The world is obsessed with appearances*. I mean c'mon, the book is called Esther, but at least Vashti says I won't play this game any more and leaves (she probably knew she wouldn't stand up in front of these leering, drunken leaders), but you see, the point is, we ARE like Esther. We want the approval even of the pagans, and it often controls us. You can run like Vashti and pretend appearances don't matter, or you can try to live up to appearances and accept that they're everything in this culture – always have been, even in the culture almost 3,000 years ago. There is ALWAYS a King Ahasuerus in your life – sure, think of Simon Cowell – who says, "Perform. Make yourself acceptable before me. And you will either get mad and rage and pretend it doesn't matter, or you'll do everything you can to please. This king – whatever it is – will take all of you. Will marry you.

So what do you do?

Well, if we follow Esther, the unseen God will take us there. But let me point you to this. Isaiah 53:1-3. This is a passage that anyone will tell you is one of the great Messianic passages in the bible. And it's a very important foretaste of what the real king is like. See, you live between two kingdoms. The kingdom that is fading away, and the kingdom that has come. And the new king looks like this:

2 For he grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. 3 He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.

This is a different kind of king. Right? His appearance ... well no one seems to notice he has no apparent, outward beauty. But later and Isaiah – Isaiah 60 – God says through the prophet,

"For the coastlands shall hope for me ... bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the name of the Lord your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has *made you beautiful*."

What does this mean? Esther was loved because she was already beautiful. Our God – he may not look beautiful to the culture because people can't earn his love – our God makes us beautiful. This is a God who brings the depraved, the unlovely, the wretched sinner in front of him, and says, "I will make you beautiful. You will be my bride. Esther has to give her life up to be with the king, but King Jesus gives up his life to be with you.

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The reason Jesus is without beauty is that he comes as the king who takes on our hideous heart – our ugliness to make us beautiful. Do you see that difference? That's the *gospel* difference. You will be beautiful from the inside out. It will be a beauty that is finally self-less – a beauty that is beautiful because it thinks about others, first. A beauty that serves and gives life, rather than absorbs and brings down. Friends, if you sell out for that ... well, you become truly beautiful one day at a time. You won't notice. It just happens.

Let's pray