

Taken

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- [0 : 00] Esther chapter 2, let's start reading at verse number 1, and I'm going to read the first four verses this morning. Sometime later, when King Ahasuerus' rage had cooled down, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what was decided against her.
- The king's personal attendants suggested, and he did accordingly.
- Father, thank you for the privilege we are enjoying this morning of gathering for worship. Thank you for the songs that we have already just sung together, reminding us of the gospel, reminding us of the blood of Jesus that is and will be our perfect, complete atonement.
- Thank you for the reminder that this is a day that you have made, and it is our privilege to rejoice in it. Father, would you help us as we turn our attention now to the preaching of your word to rejoice in the good news of the gospel, and the good news of you as our great God who is all-powerful and perfectly capable of redeeming difficult, dark, challenging circumstances that we find ourselves in.
- Father, please come and help me. Father, please come and help me keep me from foolishness and from error. Guard my heart and my mind. Help me to say those things that will draw the most attention to the Lord Jesus and maximize his glory in all of our lives.
- [2 : 21] We ask that you would change us today, that we would not merely be hearers of the word, but doers also. We ask this for your glory and our good.
- In Jesus' name, amen. Wouldn't it be easier if every decision that you make was obvious? Like a multiple-choice question.
- Which of these does not have multiple legs? An ostrich? A centipede? A starfish? Or the color green?
- Like that's an easy one, right? We know which one does not have multiple legs. What if you could look into the future and see the outcome of every choice that you make today?
- That would be nice, wouldn't it? Or if you could just see, if I take this path, where will it take me? Where will it end up? That would be amazing. That would make choosing so, so very much easier.
- [3 : 25] What if your Bible had a decision-making matrix, like an index in it, and you could just open up the back of your Bible when you were looking for what college you should go to.
- You could just look and be like, well, there it is, choosing your college. And then you could just flip to that portion of Scripture. Or who should I marry? Or where should I live? Or what should I do for a career?
- And you could just find chapter and verse. That would be nice. That would be nice, wouldn't it? Well, you're not going to find answers to those types of specific questions in the Scripture.
- But what you will find in Scripture is wisdom. Wisdom. Wisdom. Wisdom is how God's people make choices, make decisions, when our choices are not obvious and the outcomes are not clear.

Esther 2 teaches us about wisdom, about compromise, and about a gracious God who redeems imperfect choices.

[4 : 34] Our text begins with those few little words, after these things. Your text may say something very similar to that, maybe later. After these things.

That means about two to three years have elapsed between the end of chapter one and here in the beginning of chapter two. And during this time, King Xerxes has suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Greeks.

And now, having returned to Susa, some kind of regret over what he did to Vashti settles on King Xerxes.

He remembers his degrading demand. He remembers her disobedience. He remembers his drunken decision to depose his queen.

And for the second time in our story, something interesting happens. It happens to the one in the story who has absolute power.

[5 : 36] However, he allows his closest advisors to manipulate him and to make decisions for him. In chapter one, the council tells the king, you need a queen better than Vashti.

In other words, a queen who is respectful and submissive and willing to make you look good in front of others.

The council appeals to his desire for power. But did you notice, even though they said, we will find someone better than Vashti, when we get to chapter two, there is no mention of any type of character assessment.

If you want to be part of the king's harem, you need only be beautiful, young, and unmarried.

If you're taking notes, you'll see those three words repeated, verse two, verse three, and again in verse four, but in a different order and with a footnote. Previously, they appeal to his desire for power.

[6 : 48] Now, they play on his lust for pleasure. Of course, the king likes this plan, verse number four. And he issues the command to stock his harem with beautiful, young, innocent women.

And although they are beautiful already, they must undergo 12 months of beauty treatments in order to prepare them for one night with the king.

And on that night, the king would use the woman for his selfish pleasure. And in the morning, she would be deposited to his harem, unless if the king wanted to use her again.

Now, in the Hebrew text, there is a repeated euphemism that emphasizes the sensuality of this situation. And I'm just going to pause briefly for you so you can spot those as you're reading, because I think it helps us get some measure of the weightiness of this text.

Look at verse number 12. Now, when the turn came for each young woman to go into King Ahasuerus, after being 12 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, 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.

[8 : 27] In the evening, she would go in, and in the morning, she would return to the second harem in custody of Shashgaz, 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.

Now, there are at least two ways for us to think about this particular portion of scripture. We can think about this superficially, and we can see this as nothing more than an ancient beauty pageant or the Persian version of The Bachelor, who wouldn't want a chance to be with the most powerful man in the empire.

We can read this superficially. We can also read this compassionately, and if we read this compassionately, then we will be shocked at the casual cruelty of the empire.

And we will grieve for the hundreds of women taken from their homes and stripped of their futures. You should be outraged at the king's predatory serial abuse of power, and you should lament the royal exploitation of helpless women.

[10 : 01] Because even after her night with the king, she could not leave and return to her family. Her dreams for her future were permanently preempted by the king's pride and selfish pleasure.

Imagine having a closet stocked full of new toys, and at any time you could go to that closet, take out a toy, play with it.

And then when you got done, you could just toss it in a box and be done. Because no one else could ever play with that toy. This is what the king does to these women.

Now, I suspect that it's true that for some women, life in the king's harem may be an important, sorry, may be an improvement to their life.

But there is no indication that a young, beautiful, unmarried woman could choose not to be taken. And that then sets the stage for verse number five.

[11 : 15] Now, there was a Jew in Susa, the citadel, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives, carried away with Jeconia, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, had carried away.

And 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 mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. The text introduces us to Mordecai as a Jew in Susa, and that should catch our attention.

What is a Jew doing in the Persian capital? Well, a hundred years ago, Mordecai's ancestors were part of the group of Jewish people hauled off from Jerusalem and deposited here in Persia as exiles.

A hundred years ago. That makes him a second or perhaps third generation exile in Susa. He has never seen Jerusalem. He has never seen the promised land.

[12 : 45] Exile is all Mordecai knows. Mordecai is raising an orphan named Hadassah, and her Persian name is Esther, and she has, the text tells us, a beautiful figure and is lovely to look at.

We know where this is going, don't we? Verse number eight. 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 Haggai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Haggai, who had custody, who had charge of the women.

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.

Now, because she was beautiful, Esther pleases Haggai. Do you see that there in verse number nine? She is, as verse four told us, exactly the type of woman that the king is looking for.

She is apparently young, beautiful, and unmarried, and so she pleases him. But I also want you to notice that Esther wins Haggai's favor.

[14 : 32] Do you see that also in verse nine? She does whatever is necessary to get ahead, to advance, to make her way in the harem.

And as a result, Haggai quickly gives Esther extra attention, provides her with all the food she needs, all of her cosmetics, and he moves her to the very best place in the harem.

Here's the problem. Number 10. Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.

And every day, Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her. Mordecai is a Jew in Susa.

That makes Esther also a Jew in Susa. But she has not revealed her Jewish heritage.

[15 : 55] Do you remember the Daniel diet in Daniel chapter one? When Daniel and his friends refuse the king's food and wine and they ask for just veggies and water?

Esther does not seem at all concerned about following God's law concerning food. And do you remember in Daniel chapter three, when everyone hears the music and bows down to the king's gigantic, if garish statue?

Everyone that is, except for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who then stand before King Nebuchadnezzar to give an account for themselves and to have a second opportunity to do the right thing and bow down to his idol.

And they say, we will not serve your gods. Esther doesn't deny her faith. She just hides it.

It seems that Esther is unrecognizable as a Jewish woman. And after a year of beauty treatments in the harem, it is Esther's turn to be with the king.

[17 : 17] Notice how the author of this text subtly reminds us that Esther is a Jew. She should not, under any circumstances, be spending the night with an uncircumcised man who is not her husband.

Verse number 15. And when the turn came for Esther, the daughter of Abahel, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter.

When the turn came for Esther, the daughter of Abahel, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter to go into the king, she asked for nothing except what Haggai, the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised.

Now, Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. And when Esther was taken to the king Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, the king loved Esther more than all the women.

How nice. And she won grace and favor in his sight, more than all the virgins. How lovely. So that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

[18 : 40] 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.

Maybe the day that Esther was selected for the harem was the greatest thing that ever happened to her. A year of plenty of food, a year of beauty treatments, that sounds all right, if you're in exile in Persia.

Maybe Esther looks forward to capturing the attention of the most powerful man in the empire. Maybe she knows that her behavior violates God's law.

Maybe she doesn't care. But perhaps Esther loathes her circumstances. Maybe her life in the harem violates her conscience.

Maybe she ate only veggies the whole time she was there. Maybe Esther prays every day, why me, God? How long? Where are you? And why don't you do something about my circumstances?

- [20 : 06] We can't say which of these are closer to the truth. It's ambiguous. But the most obvious and the simplest reading reveals Esther to be a young, beautiful, unmarried woman who hides her identity, does not obey God's law, and begins a relationship with a pagan king who chose her on the basis of her physical beauty and behavior during a single night in his bedroom.

How do we make sense of Esther's choice? Some versions of the book of Esther add details in an attempt to make Esther's behavior less morally ambiguous.

Maybe Esther tried to hide in the harem so that all the other women had to go first, and all the while she's hoping that one of them will be selected. But that's not what the text says, is it?

Perhaps she went that night to the king but only under duress, we might say, kicking and screaming. But that's not what the text says.

Perhaps, and this is a wild rabbinic interpretation, perhaps God sent a ghost in Esther's place into the king, and so Esther was never really there at all.

- [21 : 44] Some try to alter this story to make it less morally ambiguous and to help make sense of these choices that Esther has made. Some make Esther a victim.

They point out that many of the verbs related to Esther are passive. She was gathered. She was taken. She was put into custody.

Perhaps Esther is just a helpless victim of her circumstances. But again, that's not what the text says. She did, verse 9, what was necessary to win Haggai's favor, and what was necessary, verse 15, to win the king's favor.

Some argue that the extraordinary circumstances here in Esther make Esther's behavior necessary. God has her here, after all, for such a time as this.

So, the ends justify the means. As much as I would like to, it is difficult biblically to put lipstick on Esther's behavior.

- [23 : 09] And so, readers like us are compelled to either add something to this text, text. Or, we have to admit that the Sunday school version of this story, a story that we thought we knew, may not represent a biblically faithful interpretation of the text.

The moral ambiguity of Esther too reminds us that God gives wisdom. It is easy to judge Esther when we look at the circumstances this way.

She should have resisted. I would not have compromised my faith. I would have stood strong. But in real life, the decisions that we face are often not so black and white, are they?

we often make judgment calls in theory, in what-if scenarios. And then we find that when we have to make these decisions in practice, they are much more difficult.

Brothers and sisters, similar to Esther, your life is often not neat and tidy, is it? Decisions about right and wrong, they are not always as clear as multiple choice questions like which of these has multiple legs?

- [24 : 49] Decision making in the empire often requires us to assess not what is good or bad, but what is wise and faithful.

Wisdom is how followers of Jesus make decisions in the gray areas of life. When there is no clear chapter and verse for us to go on, and our circumstances are unique and perhaps even extraordinary, what then?

There is grace for you, child of God. There is grace for you. And God gives wisdom when we ask in faith. That's what James tells us in James chapter 1.

God gives wisdom. If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God who gives generously to all without reproach and it will be given him.

When you think about the moral ambiguity and the complexity of Esther chapter 2, remember that God gives wisdom.

[25 : 55] So when you need it, ask him for it. Esther 2 also invites us to remember that God loves the unlovely.

Women, including Esther, were taken. Why were they taken? Because they were beautiful. And Esther was pleasing to the eunuch who had charge of the women in his sight, what he could see.

She was winning favor, the text tells us, verse 15, in the eyes of all who saw her. And she won favor in the king's sight. Verse number 17, Esther was chosen on the basis of her appearance.

I'm so glad that God does not look at the outside of a person. He looks at the heart. But then I am very, very humbled and I wonder if you might be as well because when God looks down at our hearts, what he sees there is sinful ungodliness of all sorts.

Anger and wrath and malice and lust and selfishness and pride and disobedience and back talking. we can be thankful.

[27 : 16] And we can overflow with worship that God chooses not for beauty but because of mercy. We read about this in Romans chapter 5 and verse number 8.

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. This is the good news of the gospel.

Unlike King Xerxes, God loves the unlovely. You do not need to undergo a year's worth of beauty treatments in order to clean yourself up, to make yourself presentable enough to be with him.

He loves sinners like you and me. are you trusting in this God? The God who loves the unlovely, the God who asks nothing of you except that you admit your unloveliness and receive his gracious forgiveness.

God gives wisdom, God loves the unlovely, and finally Esther 2 teaches us God redeems imperfect choices.

[28 : 40] It's good for us to pause and reflect on Xerxes' sinful violation of hundreds of voiceless, faceless, nameless women taken from their families and prepared for the king's selfish use by men who were themselves violated by the king.

It's right for us to ask, where is God in Esther 2? And like Esther's Jewish identity, God is hidden.

But he is still at work. God is God redeems God is God is to you hide God is to!
is God to to God to God! God redeems imperfect choices.

rest rest in this brothers and sisters. God is able to gather up every decision that you make, right and wrong, wise and foolish, and he is able to use them for your good and his glory.

[30 : 19] Your choices, whether they are simple or very complex, short term or life altering, whether you are faithful or whether you are compromising, your choices do not thwart God's good plans.

Whether Esther acts wisely or whether she looks back on this episode of her life with shame and regret, God's grace covers her choices and God's grace covers your choices too, child of God.

God is strong enough and his grace is big enough to take who you are, to take who you have become and still use you for his plan of redemption.

Esther 2 reminds us God gives wisdom, wisdom that we need for making decisions in gray areas. Esther 2 reminds us God loves the unlovely.

rest in the love of your God, brothers and sisters. And Esther 2 reminds us and as this story continues we will see that God redeems imperfect choices.

[31 : 43] Let's pray. Good Father, we are so grateful to have your word. Lord, thank you for this text and thank you for sending the Holy Spirit to be with us as we have taken time to examine it.

Father, I pray that I have been faithful in presenting this portion of scripture in a way that honors you, the God of truth, that honors you, Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, and that honors you, Lord Jesus.

the one to whom all of these scriptures are pointing. Father, would you please in this moment take away anything that has been said that would be unhelpful, undistracting, and allow us to see our Savior Jesus.

Father, we recognize the wrestle inside of our hearts that we may be feeling right now as we think about this text and we consider this text perhaps in a way that we haven't thought about it in some time.

Would you make us the kind of people who are concerned about faceless, voiceless, nameless, orphans, widows, outcasts, give us eyes to see, and give us compassion.

[33 : 18] would you please forgive us where we have failed to shine the light of the gospel, where we have put the light that you have given us under a basket, and we have hidden our faith.

Would you give us courage? Would you forgive us for our cowardice? father, would you please build us up, strengthen us, console us concerning decisions in our past, things that we look back on and we're just not sure, and we wonder, could I have handled that differently?

Could I have done that better? Was there a wiser path that I could have followed and not ended up in this place? Would you comfort and console and encourage and build us back up and remind us that our choices, imperfect though they may be, have not thwarted your good plans, and that you will receive glory?

Father, where we need fresh forgiveness, where we need encouragement, where we need comfort, would you please, Holy Spirit, do that work right now in our hearts as we prepare to celebrate the Lord's Supper?

Father, we confess what your word says is true.

[34 : 57] There is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved. Would you please call to live today someone who did not expect to receive new life from you?

Grant life, grant faith and repentance so that someone this morning responds by repenting and believing the gospel of Jesus.

Lord Jesus, thank you for your death on the cross. Thank you for your glorious resurrection. salvation. Thank you for your intercession and thank you for your ascension and for your intercession.

Now at God's right hand on our behalf, we confess that we need it every day to be faithful and wise in this world that we live in.

Help us for Jesus' sake. We ask all of these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.

[36 : 04] Thank you.