

## **Complicated Heroes Emerge (Esther 2:1-23) - 02.02.20 - Kevin P. Larson - KarisChurch.org**

Quin Snyder is now a highly-successful basketball coach for the NBA's Utah Jazz. But from 1999 to 2006, he was the head men's basketball coach at Mizzou. You could say that his time here was somewhat complicated. One mistake he made - that really ended up leading to the end - was filling a hole in his roster with an embattled player named Ricky Clemons. I won't go into the story now, but some things happened in 2003 that were embarrassing at the highest levels of the university.

The following year, the 2003-04 basketball media guide featured a photo of a Mizzou player - hands raised in triumph - after a last second shot had propelled the Tigers to victory. Turns out Clemons was the player who had made that shot. But with all of that drama in the rearview, he had been cut out of the background of that picture. Everyone in the athletic department wanted to move on - to forget it all happened. And photoshop came to the rescue. Well, a *Tribune* photographer had taken it. He noticed it. Although Mizzou athletics technically had the right to do this, mostly rightly questioned whether it was the right thing to do. When asked, an athletics official responded, "We do that with photos quite frequently if there is something in the photo we don't like."

Here's one of the things I love so much about the Bible. It's raw. It's real-to-life. Things are complicated. So are the characters. It's one of the reasons why I'm so convinced it's all true. If you go to dream up a sacred text, a holy book, you just don't include the stuff the Bible does. You photoshop it out. You don't bring that stuff up. But Scripture does. And that doesn't just mean that it's true. It means it hits us where we are. It speaks to the real world, to real people. The Bible's interesting, yes. But even more, it's relevant. God's truth hits our streets. My favorite musician, the late Rich Mullins, once put it like this:

“The Bible is not a book for the faint of heart -- it is a book full of all the greed and glory and violence and tenderness and sex and betrayal that benefits mankind. It is not the collection of pretty little anecdotes mouthed by pious little church mice -- it does not so much nibble at our shoe leather as it cuts to the heart and splits the marrow from the bone. It does not give us answers fitted to our small-minded questions, but truth that goes beyond what we even know to ask.” (Rich Mullins)

God’s word, the Bible, is amazing. And it doesn’t get much better than this book that we’re looking at over the next few months here in Karis - the book of Esther. It’s authentic history. It’s beautiful literature. Plus, it’s got the drama, the sex, the violence of an HBO series. What we’re going to see here, as we look at **chapter two**, is that when God seems silent, complicated heroes sometimes emerge. We get unedited, real life here in this story of Esther. This book is part of this big story of God that really makes sense of all life. And it also meets us, right where we’re at, helping us make sense of our day to day.

Let’s get started. We’ll see the King’s plan to find a new wife here in **chapter 2**. We’ll see how two Jews - Mordecai and Esther - get involved in the story. And there will be some important things we’ll learn from them here. But those truths may not be what you think. So hold on. Let’s jump into it this morning.

### **The Bad King**

Last week, we saw King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, throwing a party to build support for another campaign against Greece. He’s trying to show off. He’s really drunk. So he calls his wife, the queen, Vashti, who’s leading up another party for the ladies. He tells her to come and parade herself before his male guests - likely wearing only her crown. She refuses. The King rages. And they take her crown away. In **chapter 2**, he and his boys initiate a plan to find a woman to take her place.

Interestingly, **chapter 1, verse 3** tells us that the party - and Queen Vashti's refusal - had come in the **"third year of his reign,"** which would have been around 483 B.C. **Verse 16 of chapter 2** tells us that the King meets his new queen in the seventh year of his reign, which would have been around 479 B.C. So some time has passed. And during that time is another failed campaign against Greece. The Spartans are too strong. The Persians - and their King - come home defeated and dejected. And Greek historian Herodotus says the King dives into sensual overindulgence as a result. So it's no surprise that his advisers, as we see in **verses 1-4,** hatch this over-sexed plan.

Here we see what the world's authorities so often look like. The pursuit of money, of material excess. A hunger and thirst for power that can't be quenched, that won't be rivaled. And an insatiable desire for sex. Using, abusing, and casting away women. This is King Xerxes. It's what we see in Persia. It's what we so often see today.

### **A Complicated Situation: Exiled**

**God's people find themselves in a complicated situation. They're exiled.** That's the first thing I want you to see today. You knew I was going to mention the Chiefs once or twice today. This week, a friend posted an article about a sports bar in Philadelphia that shows Chiefs games every week. It's filled with people who have moved there from Kansas City. It has folks who stayed loyal to Andy Reid, who coached their team before coming to KC. But there, in Philadelphia, PA, you have this odd group of folks showing up in red and gold all the time screaming their guts out.

It's kinda like what we see here in the book of Esther. Jews far away from their homeland, gathered there in a capital of the Persian Empire. But they're not there by choice. What put them there was their sin. Or at least the sin of their parents. We learn in **verse 6** that one of Mordecai's ancestors was carried away from Jerusalem during the days of Jeconiah or Jehoiachin. And this all happened because they didn't respond to God's kindness to them with obedience.

In **Deuteronomy**, the Lord follows His list of blessings that would follow their obedience with curses that describe exactly what ends up happening to them. Says **Deuteronomy 28:36**, ***"The LORD will bring you and your king whom you set over you to a nation that neither you nor your fathers have known."*** They are carried away by the Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. The Babylonians are then defeated by the Persians. There are God's people the Jews. Stuck far from home. Because of sin.

Now it's not like they didn't have their issues in their homeland. Or they again, wouldn't even be there. But now they're in this situation. They face this challenge. Of living in the Persian Empire, where we see contests like the one we see here. Again, the King has just suffered defeat in a war. He has some time to reflect. He's no doubt depressed. Maybe he wants to distract himself. Verse 1 says he remembers what Vashti had done. They propose, in **verses 2-4**, a contest: what sounds like "Bachelor, Persian Edition."

His behavior with Vashti has been wicked and abusive. Sin always spirals downward - especially when it's unrestrained. His new plan becomes even worse. It's truly an empire-wide sex contest. Gather up the most beautiful women of the empire. Give them beauty treatments for a year. Bring the best of the best into the chamber of the king for a one-night stand. But the winner of this contest becomes the queen.

Now you have to realize: as twisted as this sounds, it would have been something most women would have pursued. The chance to be queen. To live in the palace. Fortune and glory. But the losers join the King's harem - known to have over 300 women at a time - what would have been to most a decent consolation prize. But know that those concubines would have been separated from their families. They would never have the opportunity to marry. The king wouldn't leave open the possibility of anyone comparing any other man to him! He might call them into the bedroom again. More than likely, he would not.

Historians have pointed out that as jacked up as this is, the King was a non-discriminatory abuser. He'd also recruit upwards of 500 boys to become eunuchs each year. Yes, they'd be forcibly castrated. That way they wouldn't touch his women. But what we see first here is a man capturing, abusing, and casting away women made in the image of God. It's evil. It's disgusting. This is the world in which the people of God find themselves. One again not that far from our reality in many ways.

As I mentioned last week, the Bible refers to us, too, as exiles. We're citizens of heaven. This world is not our ultimate home. One day heaven will come to earth. Jesus will raise our bodies. He'll renew all things. That's our hope. But for now, things are hard. Life in exile is complicated. For the Jews back then. For us, now, too.

But here's a truth we need to remind ourselves during our sojourn on this earth. The providence of God. His greatness. You know, we have this main street just over there, something we drive on everyday. The road is called Providence, but most people have no idea what the word means. It refers to God's control over all things in His creation.

There are a couple of aspects to that word. Sustaining. Governing. He holds everything together. He keeps things from blowing apart. He sustains His creation. He also rules over everything. Nothing happens apart from His will. Everything serves His purposes. He governs His creation. That's what Providence means.

And hear me. That also in some way includes evil. It does. Evil kings like Ahasuerus here in Esther. Now God's not the author of evil. He doesn't cause the evil to happen in the same way He creates good. But there's this idea out there that God's surprised by it and can't do much about it - or slightly better, that He sees it coming and somehow twists it into something good. But that doesn't fit with what we see in Scripture.

If you're reading though our Field Guide with us, you've just passed through the section about Joseph. You know how his brothers sold him into slavery - a really bad thing - and told their dad he was dead. At the end of his life, when he's king over them, and his brothers think he's about to cut their throats, he says to them, in **chapter 50, verse 20: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today."** Think about the cross - the most wicked deed in human history. Yet still, in some way, it was God's plan. He was fully in control. Think of it like this: as a picture - God looks at it up close and He sees evil, things He hates. He zooms out, though, and sees the whole picture. He likes what He sees.

He is God, even over our sin. And wicked kings. Bad rulers who do twisted things. It's easy to us to get all worked up today. And it's not like we can't care or speak up against misuse of power. But it's not like the Lord of the universe has lost control. He wants us to trust Him. And point the world to Him. He's in control of the world - not just the good things, but the bad. Even twisted, beauty contests.

One striking picture of God's providence is found in the plot at the end of the chapter. Look at what happens in **verses 19 through 23**. Mordecai, we've already learned, is in the citadel. He's also at the king's gate - a building where decisions were made, where business took place. He likely has an official place in the court. There he overhears a plot, one by two eunuchs. They're angry at the king. They're going to lay hands on him. Mordecai gets news of the plot to the new queen, Esther. She tells the king. It's found to be true. The two men are **"hanged on the gallows"** - really impaled on big stakes.

It's written down in the history record. And it becomes a massively important event as we move ahead in this book. Again, what seems like a coincidence - where Mordecai "happens" to be in the right place at the right time - is God's good providence to protect and bless His people. God's people find themselves in a complicated situation - they're exiled - but the Lord is still very much on the throne.

### **To Be Assimilated Or Not: The Question**

But how would they respond - in exile? Well, we know that isolation, separation were not an option. The prophet Jeremiah tells that to God's people in **Jeremiah 29, verses 5 through 7**. They were to **"seek the welfare of the city."** They were to **"pray to the Lord on its behalf."**

But they also weren't to be assimilated into that city, into the culture. God had called them to be holy. That's why they were exiled in the first place. They couldn't plunge back into sin and make things worse. But that pull is so hard. And it sure is hard for us, also.

The pull toward money. The temptation of power. The lure of sex. It doesn't look too much unlike what we see here in **chapter two**. Think about our modern hook-up culture. Men trying to bed as many women as possible. As regularly as they can. Bragging about the beauty of their conquests to their peers. Women sadly play along, trying to look hot, catering to those wicked urges. Wearing themselves out to win the attention of men. Doing all they can to perform so they can hang around. Tinder is there to make all of this quick and easy. And hearts are being torn apart in the process.

What's so sad is that this has even seeped its way into the church of Jesus today. Not only is sexual immorality still an issue, but this beauty contest rears its ugly head, as well. Young women who don't look like Instagram models - and can't get men's attention - they end up left out. Young men go through woman after woman, comparing them to one another, never making a commitment to any of them. It's wicked. It's wrong. It has to stop. Our God looks at the heart. He commits to His people. He doesn't use and abuse us. We're meant to image Him, church. It's high time, church - and particularly guys - that we stopped playing this barbaric game. Life is complicated enough without going against God's design. Sex is designed for marriage, to be protected by a covenant.

In **1 Peter 2:11**, the apostle says to us, ***"Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul."*** That's reality for us. The Jews are losing that battle. We can see the drift here in these verses. God's people are in an identity crisis. And it's hard for the pressures on the outside not to wreck what's on the inside. Look at **verse 5** again.



We don't know his original name - if he even had one - but the name Mordecai is named after the Babylonian god Marduk. It literally means man or worshipper of that foreign god. The orphan he adopted, who we meet in **verse 7**, Hadassah, at least is still known in part by that Hebrew name which means "myrtle." But her alternate name likely comes from the Babylonian goddess of love and war named Ishtar. You can see in their very names, that our two "heroes" in this book are caught between two worlds.

We can also learn a lot from the secrets they kept. Notice a couple of times in this passage that Mordecai forbids Esther from revealing that she is a Jew. We see that in **verse 10** and in **verse 20**. Now this ends up being huge in the way this story plays out. But this is a huge compromise by Mordecai and Esther. Maybe some anti-semitism is already brewing. We don't know. But this sure seems like the opposite of living as lights in the world.

Not sure if any of you watch Jimmy Kimmel. I don't much, but I caught a clip of a pretty hilarious game they play called "Traitor Schmoes." They interview fans of a team - and here they were in San Fran interviewing fans of the 49ers - and they get them to talk about how loyal they are to their team. They then casually say, "Hey, we're trying to film both sides for this segment. Do you mind putting on jerseys for the other team and saying the same thing?" It's hilarious. They keep doing it until someone refuses to betray their team.

It seems like Mordecai and Esther are too ready to switch jerseys. And if they're the leaders, the heroes, it seems like that's the way most of God's people were going. If you asked them, "Are you a Jew or a Persian?," they probably would have responded with, "Well, it's complicated."

## A Complicated People: Compromised

**God chooses to use a complicated people. They're compromised.** That's the second thing I want you to notice today. Now when Amy and I got married, I had to put my foot down on one thing. Over several years after she became a Christian, her step-mom, who God used greatly in her life, gave her a series of gifts that I didn't want strewn all over our home. I said, "I'm of course not going to ask you to throw them out, but could you please just confine them to one cabinet?"

So there, in our basement, somewhat hidden away is her collection of Precious Moments figurines. Now if you know what those are or come from Southwest Missouri, you may cringe a bit thinking about them. What's my big problem with them, some of you might ask? It's easy to think they accurately depict what a Christian looks like - the sweet, teardrop eyes - or how the Christian life looks - with constant smiles and puppies always near to lick your face. You see, life, human beings - things just aren't that simple.

We see the king's plan begin to unfold in **verses 7** and following. The king gives his orders. He sends out his edict. Young women are brought in - from all over the empire - to Susa that winter capital. Esther is, too. She ***"has a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at,"*** says **verse 7**. That, of course, gets her roped into the King's contest, **verse 8** tells us.

**Verse 9** tells us she's put in the custody of the king's eunuch, Hegai, in the palace. And she wins him over. He gives her all the best cosmetics. And the best seat at the table. She rises up the charts.

**Verses 12-14** tell us how things went down. After 12 months of beauty treatments, the women would go into the king's chamber. She'd take in with her whatever she desired. She'd go in at night. She'd try to please the king. She'd leave in the morning. She'd then join another harem led by another eunuch, Shaashgaz, and she'd wait. Likely, for life. **Verse 14** says, ***"She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name."*** Those are relevant words as the contest winds down, but they'll also be important again as we come to the climax of the story.

Well, Esther's number comes up. She goes into the king, and **verse 17** tells us she wins him over. ***"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."*** This orphan Jewish girl is suddenly the queen of all the Persian Empire. She's put in a highly strategic place. The king throws a feast - again something we see again and again in Esther. He parties. He even throws gifts at - and lowers taxes for - the people of his empire. Just because he's so happy about his new queen.

But let me get to our main point here. This is a complicated mess. You have this woman who's clearly the hero of this story who signs up for this sex contest. By hiding her identity, there's no doubt she wasn't able to keep much of the rest of the law of God, either. She compromises everything she was at least supposed to be taught for a crack at becoming the queen.

What about Mordecai? He allows his adopted daughter to be taken - perhaps so that she can reach the pinnacle of power and he can benefit from it. Like Adam, he's supposed to keep the snake out of his garden, to protect those in his care, but he, too, fails.

He hands Esther over to be a sex slave. They've compromised. So things get even more complicated, for sure.

Maybe maybe you say they didn't have a choice. But here's my easy response to this. What about Queen Vashti? The pagan Persian - we saw last week - she tells the King to drop dead. She doesn't go along with his plan. Mordecai and Esther didn't have to, either. Yes, they might have ended up dead. But they just chose to fear the king of Persia that they could see over the true King of the universe they couldn't. They were traitors. There's really no doubt.

Now we, too, have been exiled because of our ancestors' sin. We, too, have compromised too much of the time. We've been assimilated into the culture all around us far too much. We've chosen to switch jerseys far too often. Things really aren't that complicated. We're just called to obey. But because we haven't things have gotten really complicated for us.

It's here that we need to lean into a critical truth. The election of God. His goodness. Toward sinners like us. Now an election is right around the corner. Maybe you've thought of it like this: God looks at our merits, just like we do with candidates, and picks the best people. No, it's really nothing like that at all. He selects who He wants, and He usually chooses the weakest.

How did Israel even come about? The world is going to hell. God is committed to His creation. He chooses Abraham. He creates a nation in Him. Why? Because He could. Because He wanted to. But God doesn't choose Abe or His descendants because they were special. Or would be good. Listen to what He says to His people in **Deuteronomy 7**.

**Deut. 7:6** "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

**Deut. 7:7** It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,

**Deut. 7:8** but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

In **1 Corinthians 1:27**, the Lord says He chose the foolish, the weak, to make a point. God creates and preserves a people by His kindness, out of His grace. He does it then, with Israel, that nation. He does it today, forming a people made up of all nations. Still by His grace. Still for His glory.

Grudem defines election this way. "An act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign good pleasure." What's the relevance here for Esther? God creates, He preserves a people. God chooses, He uses, sinners. Sinners like Esther. Sinners like us. It's interesting. There was an early Greek translation of the book of Esther where they cleaned up our main character. They couldn't handle a hero with this kind of behavior. It was too scandalous. Grace makes us nervous. We want to feel like we earn it in some way. God uses a complicated hero here to deliver a complicated people.

Now if you grew up in Sunday School, I bet the person who was lifted up as a role model was Daniel. You know that story? He is thrown near to the powers of Babylon. He never compromises. He ends up in the lion's den. God, of course, keeps him safe. He's held up in Sunday school as one we should aspire to be. Dare to be a Daniel, they say. But have you thought about this? Maybe Esther looks a little bit more like us. Perhaps she's a more realistic role model. Because we're pretty complicated - just like her.

We like to just group people like little kids do - the good guys, the bad guys. But people aren't that simple. We're certainly not. Our hero here certainly is not. I think of some of the people involved in the big game tonight. Tyrann Mathieu is one of the Chiefs most important players. But in college, the guy nicknamed the "Honey Badger," flunked so many drug tests, that he was dismissed from his team. He ended up in rehab. He fell far in the draft. Now he's known as one of the team's best leaders.

Big Red, Andy Reid, is known as a player's coach. His fatherly personality with his team and the family atmosphere he creates has resulted in loyal players who love their job and don't want to leave. But back in 2012, his oldest son, Garrett, died from a drug overdose. A Kansas City shock-jock lost his job last year for saying he couldn't handle tough guys on his team because he couldn't handle his family. But maybe life is more complicated than that. And maybe there is hope of redemption.

It's an easy to buy into this idea that God will bless a morally exemplary life. Do the right thing. God will like you. God will bless you. But have you thought that such a mentality might be at odds with the gospel? That that's salvation by works? I'd argue that it is. We see God's providence so clearly here. We also see God's electing grace. His invisible hand at work for His children. His strong arm at work for sinners like us.

Yes, we're responsible. It's why the Jews were in Exile and how they kept getting in trouble. But God is also sovereign. He's ruling even over our sin. He's using even sinners like us . And it's not like He does it begrudgingly. He loves to do it. Why? It accents His grace. It gives Him greater glory. That, church, is the point.

So maybe you're looking at your life, and you're still cleaning up a mess. Or you've made a mess of this week, and you're not sure where it'll all lead. Your life is complicated. You've made it more complicated. The Lord calls you to Himself. He wants to know you, love you, Father you. He has compassion toward you. He even wants you on His team.

Well, Esther gets chosen to win this contest. It seems weird to call that evidence of God's providence. It feels uncomfortable to call it a result of God's election. But God, in elevating her to this position as queen, is protecting His people He has chosen and loves. And He's preserving the line through which His Messiah would come.

### **To Be Moved by Love, Or Not: The Question**

Here's the question the Jews had to answer. And so do we. Would they be moved by His love for them? Would they see God's election, His providence, and respond in praise and thanksgiving? Would His kindness toward them lead to joyful obedience? Will we see God's sovereignty over our lives - His greatness, His goodness - and trust?

It's easy for us to drive into the ditches that tempted the Israelites. Separating completely from the culture. Religiosity. Legalism. Or fully being assimilated by the culture. Irreligiosity. Relativism. We all probably have a tendency to lean one way or the other. And Satan is an expert judo artist. He wants to exploit our momentum so that we end up all the way in that direction. But the way we stay anchored - close to our Lord, and on the mission He's given us - is through the gospel.

We fix our hearts on His person. As the King of the world, the King of His people. Full of glory. Who works all things for our good. We focus our thoughts on His works. He took the curses we deserved for disobeying the law. He took them upon His shoulders on the cross. He also obeyed God's word perfectly and earned all the blessings. And all of them can be ours if our trust is in Him.

### **The Good King**

Let's contrast Jesus with the king we see here in Esther. That King takes advantage of people, of women. He takes. He abuses. Our Lord Jesus uses us to accomplish His will - what a privilege - but He doesn't "use" us. He gives Himself up for us. He pours out His life for us on the cross. He says to us, "My children, I want to be Your spouse." We're His bride. One day we'll join Him at a wedding feast. We'll be with our groom forever. As Ray Ortlund has put it, the whole story of the Bible could be explained this way. "I had you. I lost you. I want You back." That's Jesus. He's the good King. Thanks be to God.

Yeah, as fallen and finite sinners and fools, we're complicated. But if we trust in Christ, we're a part of this family. We even have a role to play! We get to be in the picture, in the story, too. We're not edited out. He's there in the foreground, arms lifted high, in victory. But we're in the background, cheesy grins on our faces, celebrating right along with Him. Good news for sinners like you and me and Ricky Clemons. When God seems silent, complicated heroes may just emerge, and it might be you or me.