

Esther 2. God's providence at work. Meet Esther and Mordecai. 26th Oct 2025

Pray:

There's an old hymn that goes like this...

*God is working his purpose out, as year succeeds to year;
God is working his purpose out, and the time is drawing near;
nearer and nearer draws the time, the time that shall surely be:
when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.*

As we continue to read the book of Esther, the book where God is not even mentioned, we may wonder at his purpose, but slowly we will see how he is providentially working all things out as we follow the story. Words from another hymn come to mind...

God moves in a mysterious way, his wonders to perform, he plants his footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.

It hasn't arrived yet, but a storm is brewing in this story, but God is mysteriously working his purpose out...

It is a story and if you haven't read chapter 1, chapter 2 won't make sense...so a quick recap for those who missed last week.

This is a story set 100 years after the Babylonian exile of the Israelites, it is set in the Persian empire, in the city of Susa. In the first chapter we meet King Xerxes, in the 3rd year of his reign, 483 BC. He was very powerful and ruled over 127 provinces. He was feeling very self-assured at that point and flaunted his power and wealth with huge banquets to show off his 'glory and majesty'.

At his second banquet, after drinking much wine he also wanted to show off his Queen and he sent 7 Eunuchs to fetch her, but she refused to go. He was furious and under the suggestion of his 7 Advisors an irrevocable decree (all his decrees were irrevocable) was made to banish Queen Vashti from ever entering the King's presence again and a statement was sent to all the provinces '*proclaiming that every man should be ruler over their own household*'.

It is a story full of satire, irony and surprising reversals.

And so, we come to chapter 2, which begins with, *Later, when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.*

This is not just months later, but rather 3-4 years later. Xerxes had been to war against Greece, but not so successfully. He returns defeated with his ego a little deflated. He wants some comfort and he remembers Vashti, the one who had been his favourite wife or

concubine. Did he now regret the decree made against her? It can't be undone, so his personal attendants have a suggestion for him. Xerxes loves taking advice from others, even these young male attendants. Perhaps they remember the advice from his seven advisors that Xerxes should find a 'better' woman to replace Vashti. It seems this has not yet happened.

The method to find a new Queen is highly unusual and extremely expensive with no regard for the young women. Normally a Queen would be sought among other royalty, but no, the young men suggest rounding up all the beautiful young virgins from across the 127 provinces. This is not a beauty contest as it sometimes portrayed. These women have not applied to be the next Queen. No, this is more aligned to human trafficking.

These women are just taken, if they are deemed to be beautiful. This is one of the times when the saying 'beauty is a curse' comes to mind. We don't know how many are gathered, but we can imagine there were quite a number. If they were not chosen by the King then they would end up in his harem anyway, they would not return to their homes, their marriage prospects over.

In this chapter we are introduced to Mordecai and Esther, the two Jewish heroes of the story.

We are told that Mordecai is from the tribe of Benjamin and from the line of Kish. Those of you who remember your Old Testament stories might remember that Saul was the son of Kish and became Israel's first King. We are also told that Mordecai had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon. Mordecai is not old enough to have been taken in exile, rather this refers to his forefathers who then settled in Susa. Not all Jews returned to Jerusalem. Some had made successful lives for themselves where they had been planted, perhaps taking to heart instructions from the prophet Jeremiah. He had written a letter to the exiles encouraging them to *'build houses and settle down...seek the peace and prosperity of the city to which I have carried you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, because if it prospers, you too will prosper.'* (Jer 29: 5-9)

Mordecai is portrayed in a completely different light to King Xerxes. We will discover that Mordecai is wise, faithful and caring. While we don't hear any mention of God, Mordecai follows the commands of the Lord which include caring for orphans. He has an orphaned cousin whom he has looked after and brought up since her parents died. Her Jewish name is Hadassah, this name means myrtle tree, which is symbolic of peace, love and prosperity. Her Persian name is Esther, the meaning of which is 'star'. She is certainly a star of this story, and shines God's light.

We are told Esther had a lovely figure and was beautiful. This did not go unnoticed and so she is among the many young virgins taken to the Citadel of Susa.

She was entrusted to the care of Hegai, who was in charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favour. Aside from the 12 months of marinating in myrrh, perfumes and cosmetics, she was also given special food and given the best place in the harem.

Esther was Jewish, but her cousin Mordecai had forbidden her to reveal her nationality. We don't know why at this stage, he might have thought there may be some who were anti-Jew and he was protecting her. In hindsight we know this was all part of God working his purposes out. In the story of Daniel (who was taken into the Kings service in Babylon) we read that he refused to eat the special food provided for him and only ate vegetables. However, in keeping her ethnicity quiet Esther would have had to eat what was given to her even if it wasn't kosher. There may be times when it is wise and okay to compromise some of our faith traditions, and there will be other times when we need to stand up and be counted for what we believe in as Christians. Mordecai and Esther will soon be challenged to stand up as Jews...

When it was Esthers turn to go for a night with the King we are told she won the favour of everyone who saw. We are not told why this is so, but her star, her light obviously shone brightly. She may have been outwardly beautiful, but it seems she was also beautiful on the inside. She wasn't self-seeking or greedy, she listened to her cousin, and she listened to Hegai who oversaw her in the harem. She took to the King only what Hegai suggested.

God's favour rested on Esther and she was the one chosen by Xerxes to be his Queen, Vashti's crown is placed on her head and another party is given in Esther's honour. In fact, a holiday is proclaimed and gifts generously distributed by the King.

The word 'favour' is mentioned many times in relation to Esther. And it makes me think of another young virgin many years later who was told that she was 'highly favoured' by God. She was told not to be afraid as she would bear God's son. Mary an ordinary but favoured young Jewish girl chosen for God's purposes. We may think that King Xerxes chose Esther to be his wife, but I think God was very much involved in this choosing...

Likewise, he had put Mordecai in his position. At the end of chapter 2 there is a little addition of a story that abruptly begins and ends. We hear that Mordecai is sitting at the King's gate, an indication that he was an official employee, which also enabled him to keep an eye on Esther. On this occasion, he hears two disgruntled employees plotting to assassinate the King. Mordecai is a faithful subject, even as a Jew, and so reports this conspiracy to Esther to pass on to the King. She does so, giving credit to Mordecai. The two men are subsequently impaled, and the King is safe. This event is all recorded in the annals of the King.

Normally a King would highly reward a person for saving him from death! But strangely this does not happen...well not yet anyway. This little story is for us to store away for later.

And so we come to the end of chapter 2. I hope this little dramatic story that is recorded in the bible, has you intrigued.

Again, what can we learn about God and what can we apply to our own lives?

We begin to see that Esther and Mordecai are carefully being put in positions for God's purposes, even though at this stage we don't know what, and neither do they. However, we see that they are behaving faithfully and as model citizens even while living as a minority under perhaps a less than desirable ruler. As I said Esther gains everyone's favour, there is something about her. God has blessed her, and people can see it.

Do we gain people's favour, can people see the light of Jesus in us? We heard in our gospel reading that we are not to hide our light. When we show care and compassion and live with integrity people will notice. There are a couple of men who like to sit outside the parish hall on one of our tables on a regular basis and they like to drink. One has a very sad and painful background. He told me this week that he doesn't usually let people into his heart, but that James and I have somehow managed to touch his heart and he feels safe with us. We have found favour with him. He says he hates the Church, but he talks to God and now there are members of the church that he likes. God has put us in our positions to shine his light and reach others.

Mordecai was faithful and used his position to save the King. He wasn't rewarded for this straight away. He could have felt overlooked and disappointed, but he carries on faithfully in his position. And indeed, even this is part of God's timing. We might remember Joseph's story, how he was sold as a slave, spent time unfairly in prison but eventually was used by God to save many people from famine as Pharaoh's right hand man.

We are to be model citizens like Esther and Mordecai. We might be called to act and serve, and we may not be rewarded for it. But God sees all that we do, and it is him that we are serving, it is him we are pleasing.

Where has God placed you? How is God using you? He has placed me here in Bass and Phillip Island, and he placed James in the church office on a Wednesday, the day these men sit out front, an opportunity to build relationships. We can choose to ignore those opportunities, or we can listen to the Holy Spirit and allow him to speak through us.

He will use us, sometimes in mysterious ways, to work his purposes out. We may not always find ourselves in a comfortable position, Esther didn't choose to leave the loving care of her cousin to be Queen, but she did choose to continue to live as the beautiful woman she had been brought up to be, and while God is not mentioned, we will see that she entrusts herself to be used for his purposes.

Will you allow God to use you – wherever you find yourself, in places of comfort and security, or places of discomfort. There are many who have been God's witnesses in suffering and even on their death beds.

Yesterday I met Sarah, a young woman with a brain cancer. There was a Devonshire tea here for her, raising money for brain cancer. We got talking and she shared that she is a Christian and lives with God's hope. While she'd rather not have brain cancer, she says she has found her God given purpose at this time. She said she didn't like public speaking but now she speaks at fundraising events along with Carrie Bickmore, has been on TV, and podcasts. She may not always mention God, but she shares hope. God's favour is on her.

Others find themselves in places of material blessing and can use their wealth to bless others through gifts of charity. I know of many who have supported churches, welfare missions or paid for someone to attend theological study.

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Let's pray: Lord we pray that you will use us to bring you glory. May your favour rest on us that others may see your light and love and be drawn to you. May we trust you wherever you place us, may we be faithful as you are faithful. Remind us that you are working your purposes out, sometimes mysteriously, even in the storms of life, you are standing and riding the waves with us and you are ultimately in control. Amen.