

The House of Mordecai

Esther 2

Sermon preached by Rev. Joshua Flinn, 10 September 2023, AM Service.

Last week we were presented with the great and powerful nation of Persia. King Ahushverush¹ had everything... and he wanted to be recognized as having everything.

But despite having all this power, he couldn't control his wife, and he couldn't control his temper.

In fact... the testimony of chapter 1 was that he couldn't actually control much of anything.

All it took was for God to incline the heart of Queen Vashti to say "no" to her husband, and the great Persian empire went into panic stations. It was so serious a problem that Queen Vashti had to be banished and cast away, never to be in the presence of the king again.

Then we get to chapter 2, and King Ahashverush remembers his judgement. It isn't mentioned in the text, but from other historical sources it appeared that three to four years have passed since the end of chapter 1. Persia has engaged in a large war and failed terribly. Perhaps that why his mind goes to his loneliness...

But we aren't told the reason.

But his wrath finally subsides. And his servants move forward on the plan. So the replacement for Vashti begins.

Allow me to make some key observations about this chapter and then I'll give a couple of points of application.

Observations:

In chapter 2, we're finally introduced to the Jews. Contrasted with Persia, the Jews are in a place of weakness... Four generations of exile to Mordecai... a fifth if you include Esther.

And Esther has lost her parents. This is a painful scene... a painful reality. A testimony of complete weakness.

Now some of you may have engaged with this book through a particular lens. Many commentators suggest that Esther is not just a victim, but a virtuous woman... her behavior and attitude to difficult circumstances should be emulated.

I would suggest to you that this is not the way she is actually presented in the book. Nor is Mordecai presented in this way.

¹ This is a transliteration of the Hebrew אַחַשְׁוֵרֻשׁ, which English Bibles traditionally render Ahasuerus.

I need to make some comment on this because it effects the entire series we're embarking on.

The Jews that are spoken about here have chosen to remain in the place of Persian exile. At this time, Ezra is back in Jerusalem rebuilding the temple. But for whatever reason, these Jews, including Esther and Mordecai, have chosen to remain behind in the capital of Persia.

Already this isn't a good sign. The consistent theme of the Scriptures thus far is that Canaan was not only a land of promise, a land flowing with milk and honey... but a land which represented a return to Eden... the dwelling place of God.

The temple in Jerusalem was very much seen as central to this theme... It was the house of God's worship. For the Jews, it's where they went to meet God and the high priest would offer sacrifices of the atonement... for their sin.

To be sure, Mordecai and others still seem to practice a form of cultural Judaism, but it seems as if their heart is not inclined to the worship of Yahweh.

To make matters worse, Mordecai, we're told, is a descendent of Benjamin. The tribe that is most famous for the atrocities committed in chapter 19 and 20 of Judges. After which they went to war against Israel rather than repenting.

Mordecai's great grandfather was Kish, meaning "to lay a trap". It was Kish that had been entrapped in his own sin, along with rebellious Israel, when God used Babylon in judgement.

Kish's son was called Jair, which means: The One giving light. We can't be clear whether this indicates any real repentance on behalf of Kish, but Jair called his son Shimei... A name that means "to hear and obey".

Is that a good sign? Well, the question is, who is he hearing, and who is he obeying?

The answer is given in the name of our main character: Mordecai: meaning literally "A follower or worshipper of Marduk. Who was Marduk? The god of Babylon. Who does Shimei hear and obey? Not Yahweh... but the Persian gods.

Esther's background also doesn't inspire confidence. She was brought up as Hadassah... yes, it's a Hebrew name, but it simply means myrtle tree. Esther was the name given, perhaps to attract her to the king, and was derived from the Persian word for 'star'. And again, it has a close relationship to the Persian God 'Ishtar'... who was their goddess of love.

Again, not a good sign.

There are other matters in our chapter that are problematic too though. The house of Mordecai seems to operate in a very similar way to that of the king.

Yes, the king's edict goes forth... yes, all the pretty women are going to be prepared for assessment. There is an authority in this.

But Mordecai told Esther to hide everything about herself that was Jewish. Now that's an interesting statement given that they're in exile. And it's doubly an interesting statement given that it meant that Esther, like all the other women of the kingdom, was being turned into a better version of Vashti. Beautiful on the outside... but ultimately a slave to the king.

So too with Mordecai. He's obviously concerned about his adopted daughter... he certainly seems to love her... but he seems more to be serving Ahashverush than Yahweh.

Which is why he is not sitting in the gate at Jerusalem, but he's sitting in the Persian king's gate in Shushan. He judges matters for this pagan king's kingdom... Perhaps he desires to protect Esther now that she's queen... but the reality is that his household no longer operates in the promised land.

The Jews still in exile, look less and less like the kingdom of God, and more and more like the world.

This being said, there are two practical points to consider:

1. The darkness needs a light... not more darkness

Consider Mordecai's approach with that of Nehemiah. Nehemiah also lived in Shushan, but he ached for the restoration of Israel. So much so that he wept and mourned and prayed earnestly for God's city to be rebuilt.

Or the psalmist, in Psalm 137:4 *"How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, Let my right hand forget its skill! If I do not remember you, Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth."*

By contrast, consider verse 10... the first of two hinges which this chapter swings on: *"Esther didn't tell anyone she was a Jew. She didn't tell anyone about her family background, because Mordecai had told her not to."*

The Jews had gone from wanting a king like the other nations, to looking exactly like the other nations in every meaningful way.

I would suggest to you that though there are differences, our modern societies present a very similar struggle with what we see in Esther. We have more in common with Israel in exile than we do with Israel in Canaan.

That's true in many respects, but not least of all because we live in a pagan nation. And we're constantly barraged by the temptation to compromise... to blend in... to take a course of least resistance.

Just use the same language as they do... watch the same things as they do... wear the same clothing that they do, drink the same things. Then you can fit in and avoid any tension.

And where has that attitude gotten the church? Is it not true that so many who identify themselves as the people of God look just like the world?

Their loves, their choices, their careers, their marriages... even down to how many children they want to have... or not to have any.

And churches have voluntarily exchanged a house of worship where God has established the terms of worship... for services which look like what the world wants them to look like. Which makes sense because they want to be attractive to unbelievers. And so they act like unbelievers to do that.

But congregation, I don't have to tell you this, that is not how you learnt Christ. Paul was very blunt to the church at Corinth over this: what does light have in common with darkness?

One of the primary questions posed by Esther is, "who rules?" And the resounding answer, from the deafening silence, is God does.

Which challenges us all to ask the question: Well, if God rules, what does it mean to look like a citizen of his kingdom? Where the king of our kingdom was willing, not to receive from the Devil all the nations of the world, in the pursuit of pleasure, but rather to think of the needs of others before himself... humbling himself, even until death on a cross, that we might be saved.

And so even in a pagan land, we are to live as citizens worthy of the gospel to which we've been called. That the good works we do, will cause even unbelievers to give thanks to their Father in heaven.

But... there's a second hinge we need to consider here. Verse 17.

2. A choice between two loves

"The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head."

Why is this a hinge?

The words here are telling.

The heart of the king had moved from lust, to love. The Hebrew word ahav is a common word for the love a husband has for his wife. As Isaac loved Rebecca, and Michal loved David...

The king's heart was moved to love Esther... also a providence of God... and she obtained grace and favor in his sight. Significantly, the word for grace there is the word Heseb...

Why is that so important? Because it's exactly the way that God also deals with his people.

Deuteronomy 7:9—"*...know that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and mercy (hesed) for a thousand generations with those who love Him and keep His commandments...*"

So what do we have here? A young orphaned girl... a descendent of Abraham... raised in a land of exile by a man who appears to have forsaken the covenant... willing to sacrifice her purity and her reputation and her future in the hope she may find a home.

Is this not just like Israel? An adulterous nation... Seeking safety in all the wrong arms.

And yet, though she's willing to enslave herself again to the world for a tiny ounce of security and peace, God still loves his people.

Again, consider the contrast.

This Persian king ruled his home by casting away his previous wife at the first sign of imperfection... his idea of finding a new wife was sleeping through every single one of the most beautiful women in entire kingdom of Persia, one after another...

How lecherous could you be? This is worse than Solomon's womanizing. Although, as an aside, how common is this with men and women even now with the sexual revolution? Does such freedom bring peace? No.

Having lost her virginity to this man, apparently willingly, given how she seeks to excel among the other virgins, she had to wait to see whether she had impressed the king enough that she might be called back by name.

This is one option, and the arms of this man are now open.

On the other hand, we have God. Perfect, kind, compassionate. Full of grace and mercy. He has been faithful to his people, protecting them, discipling them, pouring out blessing upon them.

He has done everything right. There is no imperfection in his love. Never broken covenant... and has born patiently with Israel over countless generations.

And his arms are open to receive his people back... to be orphaned Esther's heavenly father... to be Israel's beloved husband.

How patient is our God?

We can see that even now can't we? The choice between these two options? Between these two houses?

God has done everything necessary to restore his people to himself.

Two men who plotted against the Persian king ended up being offered up by Mordecai and Esther and hung on a tree.

One man who sought to overthrow the dominion of the Devil ended up being offered up by the chief priest and his house and also hung on a tree.

And through the blood of Christ, even those who had betrayed their God, and lived in enmity with him... even those deserving the judgement of exile as Israel did in Esther 2... even those who hated him, might be loved and restored, and forgiven.

Brothers and sisters, we considered last week how different God is from Ahashverush. Though the ruler of the known world, he is an ant in comparison with God Almighty.

And here we see that the love of Ahashverush is nothing compared to the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Whose love do you crave? The love of the world or the love of your God? What do your desires look like more? Do they look more like the world, or like Christ?

Challenging isn't it.

If you are a Christian, do not be ashamed of the gospel, of Christ, of your Christian faith. Do not hide it away... trust in God, and rest in the promise that you have an eternal inheritance in the kingdom by his grace.

Be strong in him, Amen.