

Esther 2 “Seeing God’s Hand When You Can’t See God’s Hand”**

Series: “When God Seems Distant”¹

Main Idea: In Esther 2, God uses a story about a beauty contest to teach us three important lessons about Himself and His ways.

- I. Let’s consider what happened.
 - A. Scene #1: A beauty contest is proposed (1-4).
 1. The king had second thoughts (1).
 2. His attendants made a recommendation (2-4).
 - B. Scene #2: A beauty contestant is introduced (5-11).
 1. Esther had a painful past (5-7).
 2. Esther received preferential treatment (8-9).
 3. Esther kept her background secret (10-11).
 - C. Scene #3: The procedure is explained (12-14).
 - D. Scene #4: Esther's turn comes (15-18).
 1. She exhibited humility (15-16).
 2. She won the favor of the king (17-18).
 - E. Scene #5: A conspiracy is uncovered (19-23).
 1. Mordecai saved the king.
 2. Mordecai was slighted by the king.
- II. Let’s consider what it says to us.
 - A. Lesson #1: God operates by a *plan*.
 1. There's no such thing as luck.
 2. The Christian life involves waiting on God.
 - B. Lesson #2: God can use our *faults* for His glory and our good.
 - C. Lesson #3: God gave you your *past*.
 1. That includes your home situation.
 2. That includes your physical characteristics.

Response: Choose to submit to the One who is Sovereign.

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 43:1-13

This morning we’re going to talk about seeing God’s hand when you can’t see God’s hand. The truth is, God is at work all the time. What an encouraging thought! But it’s something we don’t see with natural eyes. In fact, apart from His grace, God works, and we miss it time after time.

The word calls it luck. And sadly, so do God’s people far too often. “Things just *happen*,” they say. “It’s just coincidence.”

But wait. Do things just “happen?” Are our lives merely filled with random acts of chance, or is someone really in control?

Your company hires a new boss who doesn't like you and makes life miserable for you. Did that just *happen*? Your child gets cut from the ball team. A case of bad luck? He makes the team? A case of good luck? Your house is hit by a power surge in an electrical storm? Bad karma? Your town gets a rain shower that surrounding farmers miss and desperately need. Mere coincidence?

According to God's Word, the answer is *no*. Last time together I affirmed the following, fundamental biblical truth. *There is not one detail in our lives outside of God's intimate control, not one*. The Bible affirms God's sovereignty from Genesis to Revelation, but perhaps no book in God's Word portrays His sovereignty more vividly than the book of Esther.

** Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

¹ For an earlier development of this passage, see the Esther series at WBC in 1999.

The name of God does not appear one time in this ten chapter book. But He's there. In Esther we see the hidden hand of God at work.

If things just happen in this world, then we're in big trouble. Yet if God is sovereignly involved in the very details of our lives, then we can live life with confidence and peace.

Esther doesn't *explain* God's sovereignty. It *shows* it to us in living color. By presenting a true fifth century BC story, this book shows how God orchestrated world events to accomplish something amazing, for His glory, the good of His people, and ultimately preparing the world for the arrival of His saving Son.

This morning we'll be looking at the second episode. In Esther 2, God works through a beauty contest, of all things, to teach us three important lessons about Himself and His ways. First, let's consider what happened. Then let's consider what it says to us.

I. Let's consider what happened.

In 486 BC Xerxes became king of the known world, reigning from India to north Africa (see 1:1). Three years later, this Persian ruler threw the first of several banquets mentioned in the book of Esther. It lasted 180 days, and during it Xerxes showed off his splendor.

Then he threw another party, this one lasting seven days, for all the male inhabitants in the citadel of Susa. The alcohol flowed, and on day seven Xerxes made a decision he later regretted. He called for Vashti, his queen-wife, and requested she display her beauty for his male audience.

But she refused. That threw the king into a rage. Memucan, one of his counselors, offered this advice to Xerxes. Get rid of Vashti, get another queen, and let the citizens of the empire know that the king won't tolerate such insubordination.

So he did. He banished Vashti and sent messengers throughout his kingdom proclaiming that "every man should be ruler over his own household (1:22)."

Now we're ready for the second episode, which involves five scenes.

A. Scene #1: A beauty contest is proposed (1-4). Verse 1 begins, "Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her."

Notice that...

1. *The king had second thoughts (1).* Isn't that the way it often is? In the heat of a marital squabble, Xerxes made a rash decision. In his anger (1:12), he ended his marriage with Vashti. He showed her! Now he's not so sure.

Once he distanced himself from the drama and simmered down, his mind took him somewhere. What does he do? He *remembers* Vashti. He remembers what she did, and what he did. I take that to indicate he's having second thoughts.

Anger creates so many problems. It destroys families. In this case, it wreaked havoc in an empire. Ultimately, if you don't get divine help for it, your unbridled anger puts you "in danger of the fire of hell." That's the strong language Jesus used in Matthew 5:22.

Xerxes is powerful, but he can't undo his predicament, for even the king is bound by the law of the Medes and Persians. So...

2. *His attendants made a recommendation (2-4).* "Then the king's personal attendants proposed, 'Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king.'³ Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the

king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them.
4 Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it."

So here's the proposal. Xerxes was to authorize a kingdom-wide search for a new queen. His commissioners were to locate and bring to Susa the most beautiful women of the land. Hegai, one of the king's officials, would prepare the ladies for the contest, the winner of which would be the king's new wife.

Not surprisingly, the recommendation "appealed to the king" as verse 4 states. Does that surprise anyone? Here's a man who has a problem with alcohol (1:10), who views his wife as an object he can use to impress his drinking buddies (1:11), and who can't control his temper (1:12). He lives to please himself, and could care less about God and holiness.

In reality, this king is a slave, a slave to his own passions. So it's no wonder the proposal appealed to him. Xerxes is a self-focused, powerful man who lives to please himself. Yet the hand of God is at work in ways that will soon be apparent.

B. Scene #2: A beauty contestant is introduced (5-11). We'll meet her in a moment, but first, we're introduced to her cousin in verses 5-6: "Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish,⁶ who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah."

A Jew named Mordecai was in Susa. Mordecai is one of the main characters in the storyline of Esther. Concerning him we learn some important information right here. He's a Benjamite. His great-grandfather, Kish, had been exiled from his homeland along with King Jehoiachin (which occurred nearly 120 years earlier in 597 B.C.). Mordecai, then, had been born and raised in exile. He's a Jew living outside the Promised Land in Susa.

The question is this. What's Mordecai doing in Susa? You'll recall that God raised up the Babylonians to judge His wayward people. He told them they would live in bondage for seventy years, and then be released to return home. He then raised up King Cyrus who gave the Jews their ticket home. But, very few returned home, less than sixty thousand. Most of them, to put it bluntly, chose to disobey God and stayed in Babylon. They decided to live *outside of God's will* in a pagan land rather than the promised land.

And Mordecai was one of them. He shouldn't have been in Susa. But he was.

Does our disobedience catch God off guard? No way, as we'll see.

In scene 2, we're introduced to a potential contestant. The woman's name is Esther, and she happens to a cousin of Mordecai. The narrator informs us of three things about Esther.

1. *Esther had a painful past (5-7).* She was an orphan, a fact we learn in verse 7, "Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah [meaning "myrtle"], whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther [which comes from the Persian word for "star"], was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died."

It would be tough to grow up in a strange land. It would be even tougher to grow up there without your parents. That's what happened to Esther. She's a minority, a Jew in a land ripe with anti-Semitism (as we'll see in chapter 3).

By the way, does God have anything to do with painful pasts? Often, we tend to have a pinball machine view of life. We see painful events in life as meaningless obstacles that bounce us all over the place, and prevent us from reaching the desired destination. Oh, God may feel for our pain, but He seems frustrated by it.

Not so. Nothing surprises God.

In the midst of Esther's pain, she had two key assets. One, she had a cousin who cared for her. And two, she had beauty, for she was "lovely in form and features (7)." Both assets play a vital role in the unfolding story.

Esther not only entered the contest, but...

2. *Esther received preferential treatment (8-9)*. As verses 8-9 explain, "When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem.⁹ The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem."

Here's the sequence. The king's edict went into effect, and lovely ladies from all over the empire were transported to the capital and placed under Hegai's care. Esther was included.

The text indicates that "many" girls were brought. Josephus suggests the number was 400. Out of them all Esther won the favor of the contest administrator, and was granted special privileges. Hegai gave her special beauty treatments, special food, as well as assigning her the best place to live with seven royal servants to assist her.

The narrator throws in an important sidelight in verses 10-11: "Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.¹¹ Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her." We're told that...

3. *Esther kept her background secret (10-11)*. Why? Because Mordecai told her. But why? Maybe Mordecai thought Esther would have no chance in the contest if people knew she wasn't Persian.

There is an unanswerable enigma here. Why did Esther enter the contest in the first place? In order to prepare for the contest she had to eat un-kosher foods, thus violating God's ceremonial laws. The contest itself involved sexual immorality, a clear violation of God's moral law. And if she won the contest, she would marry a pagan Gentile, which meant she would again be violating God's law. So why *did* Esther participate?

You say, "The king gave an order. She didn't have a choice." Actually, she did. She could have done what Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego did. Remember? When King Nebuchadnezzar commanded these men to bow before his golden image, they refused to violate God's law and said *no* to man's law (Daniel 3:18). They were willing to die rather than disobey God, and in their case, God rescued them from the fiery furnace.

Esther, too, could have chosen to obey God rather than the king. True, it may have cost her her life. But she didn't. In fact, there's no mention that Esther (or Mordecai) prayed about this or sought God's will. It seems they chose expedience rather than obedience.

Do God's people ever do that today? Do we ever choose to do things we shouldn't? And when we do, what does that do to God and to His plan? Does it catch Him off guard and frustrate Him? I think that's the point of this story. Not to commend Esther and

Mordecai as perfect examples, for they weren't. Rather, to commend the perfect God to us, whose providence never fails and who therefore is worthy of our complete trust.

C. Scene #3: The procedure is explained (12-14). "Before a girl's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics.¹³ And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.¹⁴ In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name."

This wasn't an ordinary beauty contest. For starters, the participants underwent twelve months of beauty treatments in preparation—six months of oils and six months of perfumes [Persia and India were known for their aromatic perfumes]. Then, when a candidate was ready, she was permitted to take whatever she wanted (jewels, clothing, ornaments) to meet the king. Finally, the maiden would go to the king's presence in the evening, spend the night with him, and leave in the morning.

One commentator suggests this shows “the inhumanity of polygamy.”² How true. The majority of the women in this contest would never even see the king again. They would enter his harem never to leave. Though they no doubt lived in luxury the rest of their lives, these women would never be privileged to marry and have their own families. They were objects of the king, pawns in an ugly, royal chess match.

Keep this in mind. The book of Esther is narrative literature. It tells us what happened, not what *should* happen. From creation, God's intent has been one man and one woman for life.

Premarital sex is wrong. Extramarital sex is wrong, whether in deed or thought. There are consequences for such sin, namely guilt before a holy God. By the way, even if there are no *feelings* of guilt, the *fact* of guilt remains until forgiveness is sought. If you've committed sexual sin, you can be cleansed by the blood of Jesus. But you must acknowledge your guilt, and submit your life to God's standard.

D. Scene #4: Esther's turn comes (15-18). "When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her.¹⁶ She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign."

Notice the time frame. It's the *seventh* year of Xerxes' reign, the winter of 479 BC. When was Vashti banished? In the *third* year of his reign (1:3). Simple arithmetic reveals there's been a four year gap between Vashti and Esther.

Why the delay in the search for a queen? The Bible doesn't tell us. But according to extrabiblical records, Xerxes was involved in a three year military campaign against the Greeks—which he lost—and returned home in 479, the year he met Esther.

I'm convinced that Esther was more than just a pretty face. She was a humble, teachable, as well as resourceful woman. In verses 15-16...

² Baldwin, p. 67.

1. *She exhibited humility (15-16).* When her turn came she submitted to the wisdom of Hegai. She asked for nothing other than what he suggested. And here's what happened...

2. *She won the favor of the king (17-18).* "Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.¹⁸ And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality."

What are the odds? Out of thousands of women in the massive Medo-Persian empire, hundreds are chosen for the contest. And out of the hundreds in the contest, an orphan girl wins. But not just any orphan girl, a *Jewish* girl, a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The new queen just happens to belong to the chosen people of God.

A coincidence? Hardly. It's another evidence of the hand of God at work.

E. Scene #5: A conspiracy is uncovered (19-23). "When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.²⁰ But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.²¹ During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.²² But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai.²³ And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were hanged on a gallows. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king."

The fifth scene features Mordecai. Notice where he is in verse 21, "sitting at the king's gate." In that day the "gate" was where official business occurred. Most cities were walled, and sooner or later all the citizens would pass through the gate. If you had a legal problem, you didn't go to the court house, but to the city gate. There you'd find the city officials.

That's where Mordecai was. Apparently, he's now a judge. McGee comments, "Isn't it interesting that when Esther became queen, the next thing you know Mordecai was a judge, sitting in the gate? That was nepotism--getting your kinfolk into office. I do not know whether Mordecai was made judge because of his ability or because Esther whispered in the ear of the king, 'This man Mordecai has been like a father to me. He's a man of remarkable ability, and I think you ought to give him a good position.' The king may have said, 'Well, that's interesting. We've just had an opening for a judge here at the east gate, and I'll give him that position.' Esther is a very human book...and politics haven't changed a bit, have they?"³

At this point an event is mentioned that seems insignificant, but in fact is central to the whole book...

1. *Mordecai saved the king.* While at work one day, Mordecai caught wind of an assassination plot against the king. Two of Xerxes' officers, Bigthana and Teresh, were conspiring to eliminate their boss. They were "guards of the door" (21), indicating their job was to protect the private apartment of the king. For some reason, they became angry with Xerxes' and plotted to murder him.

³ J. Vernon McGee, p. 55.

By the way, plots against Persian monarchs were not uncommon. In fact, fourteen years later in 465, Xerxes was indeed assassinated in his bedroom in a similar conspiracy led by his chiliarch Artabanus.⁴

But this time, Mordecai intervened. He informed Esther of the plot, who in turn told the king, giving credit to Mordecai. Xerxes investigated the matter, found it to be true, and hung the two conspirators.⁵

So the king rewarded Mordecai, right? In appreciation for his loyalty, he promoted him to chief judge, didn't he? Not exactly. Actually, nothing happened. Simply put...

2. *Mordecai was slighted by the king.* I wonder what Mordecai thought. "What a raw deal! You save the king's life, and what thanks do you get? Not even a handshake!"

Is God in control when you're slighted on the job? When you do a good job and someone else takes credit for it, is God napping or is He at work then, too?

The final words of chapter two seem sort of anti-climactic, but things aren't always as they seem. Verse 23, "All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king." God knew what Mordecai did. And in His time, He'll remind Xerxes. In His *perfect time*.

What a story, huh? Yet God didn't give His Word to intrigue us, but to teach us and thereby transform us.

II. Let's consider what it says to us.

I think God preserved this story to teach us some important lessons—about God, about God's ways, and about ourselves. I see at least three lessons.

A. Lesson #1: God operates by a *plan*. And nothing can hinder it. In eternity past God chose to form a people for His glory. The story of the Bible explains how He's doing it. He's in control of the past, present, and future. He orchestrates world history to fulfill His plan. Ephesians 1:11 says He "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."

Practically speaking, that means two things...

1. *There's no such thing as luck.* Either good or bad. A girl loses her parents and is raised by her cousin in a foreign land—is that bad luck? She happens to be a knockout—is that good luck? She's recruited for a pagan beauty contest and just "happens" to win—is that luck? No.

Plug in the details of your life. Perhaps your parents divorced when you were growing up. That's a terrible thing for a child to endure. And when it occurred, was God on vacation? No. This is a mystery our finite minds cannot fully grasp, but it's the biblical truth. God is in control of everything, and He's committed to using all events for His glory and our good.

So in the meantime, what are we supposed to do? A key word is *wait*.

2. *The Christian life involves waiting on God.* Mordecai did a good deed, was overlooked, and had to wait.

So much of living a godly life involves *waiting*. We're called to live by faith, not by sight. It's not easy.

⁴ Huey, p. 810.

⁵More likely, he impaled them on a stake rather than hanging them by their necks. Impaling was not unusual in the Persian Empire. Darius, Xerxes' father, once impaled 3,000 men. (B.K.C.)

“Why should I be faithful to my wedding vow? It doesn’t seem to be worth it.” It will. “Why should I keep praying for my unsaved loved one? I’ve been doing it for years. Is God even listening?” Yes, wait on Him. “Life’s hard! I feel like throwing in the towel. God doesn’t seem to be doing anything. Doesn’t He see?” Yes, He’s at work. Wait on Him.

Isaiah 40:31 says, “They that *wait* upon the Lord shall renew their strength.” Psalm 27:14 gives this charge, “*Wait* for the LORD; be strong and take heart and *wait* for the LORD.” What enables us to wait is the knowledge that *God operates by a plan*.

Ultimately, His plan is to save sinners and make them His children. That’s what He’s doing in Esther, preserving the nation He chose to be the means through which He would send the Savior into the world. The events of Esther take us one step closer to the Messiah. God operates by a plan.

On Good Friday God’s plan didn’t make sense either. What’s God doing, letting wicked men kill His precious Son? He knows what He’s doing. Through His Son’s death, and His triumphant resurrection, He’s providing sinners with the gift of forgiveness and eternal life. See His hand, and cherish His gift.

B. Lesson #2: God can use our *faults* for His glory and our good. In my estimation, as I mentioned earlier, the purpose of this book isn’t to give us role models. If you pattern your life after Esther and Mordecai, you’re in for heartache. God didn’t give us Esther to show young women how to get a man, nor Mordecai to show men how to succeed in business. In this book God often works through them *in spite of* what they did, not because of it.

Which is what He often does with us. God can use things He doesn’t condone in order to bring about His glory and our good. In Esther’s case, it was a sensual beauty contest. What about in your life?

Perhaps in the instant replay of your memory, your pause button is stuck on an ugly event you can’t shake. “Oh, how I blew it! I sinned and now God’s done with me!”

No, He’s not. There’s hope because of Calvary.

Dear friend, God knew all about what you did *before* you ever did it. And even before you committed that sin, God’s Son went to the cross and paid its penalty. Jesus Christ is alive today and will wash you clean if you will call upon Him, believe that He died for you, as your substitute, and surrender your life to Him.

C. Lesson #3: God gave you your *past*. Did Esther’s painful past just “happen,” or did God have something to do with it? Did her preferential treatment in the palace just “happen,” or was God at work?

Bring it closer to home. What about your boss, or your teacher or coach at school? Is it just a matter of fate that you “happened” to be under their authority? No. The doctrine of God’s providence assures us that God orchestrates the specific details of our lives. I don’t know what that does for you, but it gives me confidence. There is no need to live in the constant fear of “*What if?*” “What if I get a boss that doesn’t like me?” “What if I have a coach that shows favoritism?”

Do those things happen? Sure they do! Does it hurt? Sure it does! But is God in control? Yes, He is. God gave you your past. Let’s be more specific...

1. *That includes your home situation.* God placed you in the very home situation in which He wanted you to honor Him. He gave you the parents He wanted you to have. Perhaps He took one or both of them from you by death or divorce or abandonment.

Too often we think, "Well, I could really serve God *if only*..." Like, "*if only* I had different parents." Or, "*If only* my home life had been different."

Don't live in a what-if world. Chose to trust and honor God in the real world. He will enable you. Indeed, He promises to help you.

Is God able to use a painful past for His honor and our good? Yes, He is. Will He give you grace so you can trust and please Him no matter what the adversity? According to 1 Corinthians 10:13, He will. "God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

The "way out" starts by affirming this truth. God gave you your past.

2. *That includes your physical characteristics.* God gave you the physical abilities you have. Are you tall, short, fast, slow? Can you sing? Can you work with your hands? Psalm 139 says that God "knit me together in my mother's womb (13)." I should praise Him for I am "fearfully and wonderfully made (14)."

God made Esther very beautiful. I found an interesting observation by J. Vernon McGee, "Beauty is God's handiwork, and it is wonderful to see that it can be dedicated to Him. I wish today that the devil did not get so much that is beautiful in this world, but he does. If God has blessed you with good looks, offer that to Him for He can use it."⁶

He did with Esther. Have you accepted the way God has made you? He made you the way you are for a purpose. Are you using what He has entrusted to you for His honor?

John Wesley's father, Samuel, was a dedicated pastor, but there were those in his parish who did not like him. On February 9, 1709, a fire broke out in the rectory at Epworth, possibly set by one of the rector's enemies. Young John, not yet six years old, was stranded on an upper floor of the building. Two neighbors rescued the lad just seconds before the roof crashed in. One neighbor stood on the other's shoulders and pulled young John through the window. Samuel Wesley said, "Come, neighbors, let us kneel down. Let us give thanks to God. He has given me all my eight children. Let the house go. I am rich enough."

John Wesley often referred to himself as a "brand plucked out of the fire" (Zech 3:2; Amos 4:11). In later years he often noted February 9 in his journal and gave thanks to God for His mercy. Samuel Wesley labored for 40 years at Epworth and saw very little fruit; but consider what his family accomplished!⁷

With God there is no such thing as luck. Therefore...

Response: Choose to submit to the One who is Sovereign.

Will you say with the hymnwriter...? "Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Thou art the Potter, I am the clay. Mold me and make me after Thy will, while I am waiting, yielded and still."

⁶ McGee, p. 49.

⁷W. Wiersbe, *Wycliffe Handbook of Preaching and Preachers*, Moody Press, 1984, p. 251