

# Faithfulness in strange circumstances

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[ 0 : 00 ] We'll read together from God's Word from the book of Esther and we'll read together chapter 1 and chapter 2. This is what happened during the time of Xerxes.

The Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces, stretching from India to Cush. At that time, King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa.

And in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes and the nobles of the provinces were present.

For a full 180 days, he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. When these days were over, the king gave a banquet lasting seven days in the enclosed garden of the king's palace for all the people from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa.

The garden had hangings of white and blue linen, fastened with cords of white linen and purple material to silver rings on marble pillars. There were couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement or porphyry, marble, mother of pearl and other costly stones.

[ 1 : 29 ] Wine was served in goblets of gold, each one different from the other. And the royal wine was abundant in keeping with the king's liberality.

By the king's command, each guest was allowed to drink without restriction. For the king instructed all the wine stewards to serve each man what he wished.

Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women in the royal palace of King Xerxes. On the seventh day, when King Xerxes was in high spirits from wine, he commanded the seven eunuchs who served him, Mehumun, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas, to bring before him Queen Vashti, wearing her royal crown, in order to display her beauty to the people and nobles.

For she was lovely to look at. But when the attendants delivered the king's command, Queen Vashti refused to come. Then the king became furious and burned with anger.

Since it was customary for the king to consult expert in matters of law and justice, he spoke with the wise men who understood the times and were closest to the king.

[ 2 : 57 ] Karshana, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Merez, Marsana and Memucan, the seven nobles of Persia and Media, who had special access to the king and were highest in the kingdom.

According to law, what must be done to Queen Vashti, he asked. She has not obeyed the command of King Xerxes that the eunuchs have taken to her. Then Memucan replied in the presence of the king and the nobles, Queen Vashti has done wrong, not only against the king, but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes.

For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women, and so they will despise their husbands and say, King Xerxes commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, but she would not come.

This very day, the Persian and Median women of the nobility, who have heard about the queen's conduct, will respond to all the king's nobles in the same way.

There will be no end of disrespect and discord. Therefore, if it pleases the king, let him issue a royal decree, and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media, which cannot be repealed, that Vashti is never again to enter the presence of King Xerxes.

[ 4 : 29 ] Also, let the king give her royal position to someone else who is better than she. Then, when the king's edict is proclaimed throughout all his vast realm, all the women will respect their husbands, from the least to the greatest.

The king and his nobles were pleased with this advice, so the king did as Memucan proposed. He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script, and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.

Later, when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what he had decreed about her.

Then, the king's personal attendants proposed, let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women 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. Then, let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.

[ 5 : 55 ] This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. Now, there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin named Mordecai, son of Jer, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiakim, king of Judah.

Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful.

Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died. When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Haggai.

Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Haggai, who had charge of the harem. She pleased him and won his favor.

Immediately, he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

[ 7 : 27 ] Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day, he walked to and fro near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her.

Before a young woman's turn came to go into 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.

And this is how she would go to the king. Anything she wanted was given to her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.

In the evening, she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shazgaz, 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. When the turn came for Esther, the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihel, 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.

- [ 8 : 49 ] And Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her. 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.
- Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favour 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. 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. When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.
- 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.
- [ 9 : 58 ] 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.
- But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles.
- All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king. Amen. Amen.
- Well, if you've been at the prayer meetings or some of our other online events over the last months, if you've been watching closely on Zoom, you'll have seen some of the growing Lego collection behind my head on the shelves there.
- The pretense has vanished. The Lego is not just for the children. It is absolutely my toy too. Now, with Lego models, you know what it's going to end up looking like, right?
- The picture's there on the box. You know what you're heading for when you start to build the model. But often in the early stages of the building, what you're putting together looks nothing like how it's going to end up.
- [ 11 : 28 ] There's a whole bunch of preparatory work first before it takes on its final form. It is probably not immediately apparent to you what this is going to end up being.
- But if I tell you that these little archways here, those are cannon ports, then it begins to take shape as a pirate ship. The book of Esther shows us something of a similar process.
- Because we begin with no idea where we're heading. No idea why we are in the court of the Persian king. What does this have to do with God's people?
- We don't even meet any Jews until the second chapter. And famously, God is not mentioned once in the course of the book. We wonder why these different things are happening.
- But as we work our way through the story over the coming weeks, what we see is that these are unexpected terms. The funny, misshapen lumps. The things that we look at and say, why would that be that way?
- [ 12 : 28 ] As we work through, we see these are according to God's purposes. These things build together to produce the end result that he intends. Therefore, if you look at your life and your circumstances now and you wonder, how can these things build together to produce a beautiful end result?
- If you wonder why God does things the way he does, then this is the book for you. There are plenty of other things that we'll encounter along the way as well, plenty of other things that it teaches us.
- But this is the big underlying theme. God behind the scenes. God at work when you can't see him. So before we dive into these first couple of chapters particularly, let's get our bearings a bit.

If you were there for the Bible course sessions, this diagram should hopefully be familiar. The storyline of the Bible from Genesis through to Revelation. Obviously here in Esther, we're in the Old Testament.

This is before Jesus. More specifically, this is after the division of the kingdom where it splits into the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

[ 13 : 38 ] This is after that and after also each of those kingdoms in turn were sent off into exile. The kingdoms conquered and the people taken into exile. Therefore, we're in that little red bit there between the exile and Jesus coming to live on earth.

To give you a little bit of a feel for the time spans here, Jerusalem falls in 586 BC. Fifty years after Jerusalem falls, the book of Ezra records the exiles given permission by Cyrus to go home.

Another Persian king, Cyrus, before Xerxes, he gives them permission to go and many do. Zerubbabel leads a group to do just that and that's recorded in Ezra and then Nehemiah, those who return.

After that return, another 50 years and we come to the events of the book of Esther. So we're about 100 years after Jerusalem fell.

The Xerxes of verse 1, he comes to the throne in 486 BC and verse 3 tells us our story begins three years into his reign. But we're not back in Jerusalem with the returned exiles.

[ 14 : 51 ] We're in Susa. We're in Xerxes court. Not back in the land of God's promise in this pagan environment. The Jews we meet in this story, they're not the Jews who went back to the land, back to the homeland.

No, these are the Jews who stayed right in the midst of the empire, stayed in the places that they've been deported to. They went involuntarily but for whatever reason, they now choose to remain.

All wasn't rosy for those who returned. The land of Israel is still part of the empire. You're allowed to go back there but you're still under the authority of Xerxes and therefore, plenty of other Jewish girls besides Esther presumably gathered into the harem in chapter 2.

From those back home in Jerusalem, others dispersed across the empire. All is not rosy for them going back but the book of Esther is concerned with the early years of what we might call diaspora Judaism.

So this is no longer properly the era of the exile. We're into the next stage beyond that. Permission is given to return but not all have done so and those who remain are called the diaspora.

[ 16 : 05 ] So for the Jews in this context, the pain of the exile is still quite fresh. It's still in relatively recent memory. It's still a topic of conversation.

It's still part of their experience. They know they live under the authority of another empire and they know that the exile happened because they did not keep faith with their God.

Plenty of prophets have been and told them exactly that. And so the question for them now is if we didn't keep faith with God, will he keep faith with us?

How will he treat us now in this new situation? The books of Ezra and Nehemiah answer that question for those who went back to the land of Israel and the book of Esther offers something of an answer to the people of the diaspora.

Now it seems to me that this diaspora context, this is possibly one of the most readily comparable situations to our own day in the whole of the Old Testament because as Christians today we don't live in a theocracy like the ancient land of Israel pre-exile.

[ 17 : 14 ] We don't even live kind of in the return from exile in that enclave of others who believe the same as we do in the safety of Jerusalem like those who returned. The laws of our land today are not God's laws, are they?

We're faced with the same temptations as these Jews in the Medo-Persian Empire. We have the same questions, don't we?

How much assimilation to the culture is too much? It would be very easy, wouldn't it, to settle into a comfortable coexistence and lose any kind of distinctive identity.

So as we come to chapters 1 and 2 this evening, we're not going to dive into every detail of them. My plan here is to kind of quickly summarize the events of that sweep of the narrative and then dive into a couple of themes that come out through it.

Specifically, we're going to think about the unchecked abuse of the Emperor Xerxes. Then we'll look at the moral murkiness of most of the other characters in this narrative and then return to this theme of God behind the scenes at the end.

[ 18 : 28 ] So, the story begins. We're in the court of the Emperor, the Emperor whose wealth and power is flagged up for us from the start. This vast empire, not quite a place where the sun never sets, but certainly an impressive region, a wide area of dominion.

And so great is the wealth of this Emperor. He puts it on display for six months, a feast that must have seemed never ending in the midst of it, a feast for all the officials of his empire.

And then after that, this letter feast for others, verse five, for everyone in the citadel of Susa. You live in this city, come in. Come and feast at my table.

Come and enjoy my abundance. The garden where even this letter feast takes place, this is a lavish garden, isn't it? The path you walk on is made of the sort of precious stones that wouldn't look out of place in a ring on someone's finger.

Wine without limit. Every guest offered whatever he might wish. And as is so often the case, that bottomless wine bottle leads to trouble.

[ 19 : 37 ] Verse 10, Xerxes decides that the display of his power and wealth needs complete ink. And so he summons his queen to be the centerpiece of it.

She refuses and he flies into a rage. His closest confidants convince him that this is a dangerous precedent. It cannot be allowed and so she's banished, never to be in his presence again.

And he issues an edict commanding the women of the empire to respect their husbands. Because what we all know is that the best way to gain respect is to command that it be given.

That's chapter one. A little bit of time passes. Xerxes remembers he did used to have a king. A king? He did used to have a queen and he quite liked having a queen.

So maybe he could do with a new one which leads his attendants to suggest this contest. Find the most beautiful virgins throughout the empire, bring them all here and take your pick.

[ 20 : 36 ] In possibly one of the greatest understatements in history, verse four records this advice appealed to the king and he followed it. Before the women are gathered, we then have this interlude, verses five through seven where Mordecai and Esther are introduced to us, complete with their family history.

But then we learn verse seven, Esther is a young woman with a lovely figure and beautiful. And we can see where this is headed, can't we? She is duly taken into the harem, entrusted to the eunuch Hegai.

She wins his favor and therefore the best treatment from him. And she, like all the others, has this one-year beauty regime and her turn arrives, she has her one night to shine.

One night in the king's bedroom with whatever she chooses to bring along. And she follows the advice of Hegai on what to take. Her turn comes, we learn, verse 16, in the tenth month of the seventh year of his reign.

In other words, four years have passed since Vashti refused to come to that banquet. Four years during which Xerxes has gone and prosecuted an unsuccessful military campaign in Greece.

[ 21 : 50 ] And so he's back, battered, bloodied, probably not literally, but his pride at least, bruised by the loss. So he's back home and he's consoling himself for his defeats, throwing himself into this grueling task of choosing a new queen.

Verse 17, 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.

Then finally, verses 19 through 23, Mordecai uncovers a conspiracy, these men plotting to kill the king. He passes on this information through Esther. The plot's foiled. Mordecai has acted as a loyal citizen of the empire.

The men are executed and it's recorded in the book of the annals. Whistle stop tour in case, you know, it didn't quite sink in as Brian read it.

What about these characters then? First up, the unchecked abuse of King Xerxes. I mean, it's maybe not terribly surprising in this context, is it? Ancient monarch, near absolute power, near total corruption.

[ 23 : 03 ] He's set up that way from the stars, isn't he? This description of the size of the empire, the lavishness of his palace. He has everything he could possibly want and yet, yet this man who controls all this immense wealth, who controls a vast empire, proves to be unable to control his own wife.

Now, why does she not come? There are plenty of competing suggestions. You have the ancient commentators who rebuke her sinful disobedience and her willfulness.

Through to the opposite end of the spectrum, you have this more modern idea that Vashti is some sort of proto-feminist, you know, striking a blow for women's rights, refusing to be pushed around.

Somewhere along the way, you have a bunch of rabbis suggesting that the problem is that she's commanded to appear wearing only her crown in verse 11. I don't think any of those explanations are quite right.

It doesn't say only. And to read the concerns of our present day back into that situation, it is somewhat anachronistic. Now, the most plausible reason seems to be that she refuses simply because this demand is deeply demeaning.

[ 24 : 21 ] And it is that in that context too. Xerxes' demand for her obedience in this situation is an abuse of his power. And a bit of context further cements this theory.

See, the women are at their separate banquet according to this narrative, right? But that doesn't mean there are no women present at Xerxes' banquet.

See, the system goes. The queen, the other female honored guests, they're there for the first part of the feast. And then when the king later on in the course of events decides that it is time to get down to the serious business of the night, to get serious about getting drunk, at that stage he sends the queen and the other women away.

And in this case, Esther 1, she then hosts her own separate feast. And back at the king's feast, with the wives off away, the concubines and the courtesans are then summoned to entertain the guests.

And you can fill in for yourself some of the content of that entertainment. So, when in verse 11, the king summons Vashti at this stage of proceedings, what he does is he reduces her from the status of queen to that of concubine.

[ 25 : 42 ] This is a deeply degrading summons. He treats his wife, the queen, as if she were a hired dancer. Do you see his stated purpose there in verse 11?

He doesn't summon her because he wants to introduce her to his friends.

He does not want her input on the discussion. He does not value her as a person at all. He summons her to be displayed. The crown jewel of his display of wealth and power.

A sort of porcelain doll there to be looked at. A trophy wife and then some beyond. So no wonder she refuses to come. I have no problem at all saying that Ephesians 5, 1 Peter 3, their instructions to wives to submit to their husbands, they've found a limit in a case like this.

An ungodly husband making unholy demands of his wife that are intended only to demean her, she is entirely justified to disobey. Karen Job says, given the state of mind of Xerxes, the implied purpose of his command, one might be inclined to give Vashti the benefit of the doubt in this case.

[ 27 : 00 ] Yeah, we might. So Xerxes is thwarted. Ecclesiastes 5, 10, whoever loves money never has enough.

Whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. His vast wealth. All the wealth of half the world flowing into his palace.

There on display, it has gained him nothing. He is at this point in serious danger of losing the respect of everyone. So he responds in the only way that he can at this point.

Xerxes here is like a spoilt child. This is Veruca Salt touring Willy Wonka's chocolate factory and demanding that her father get her an Oompa Loompa and a performing squirrel.

It's that level of tantrum. But he's not a toddler, is he? He's the despotic ruler of an empire built on power and force.

[ 28 : 00 ] He cannot allow an insult to stand. If the cracks begin to show, everything is going to spiral out of control. He's not a toddler. He's a king with an army to make his will stick.

So some commentators make a big deal of the fact that what is on some level a dispute between a husband and wife, that this turns into a grand state crisis with consequences across the empire.

Why, we ask, is this marital disharmony not resolved with an apology and some counseling? Why not? Well, because it can't be. He's backed into a corner.

He's not just a guy with his wife. This is a king and his queen. It is a matter of state. Unsurprisingly, verse 15, he asks, what must be done according to the law?

And verse 16, this advisor, Memucan, he lays out this grand, dramatic scenario where all the women of the empire will follow her example.

[ 29 : 05 ] Now, we might suppose he's exaggerating a little bit to make his point, and we might ask whether it would really be so bad if they did follow her example in responding to these sort of unseemly commands that maybe these men might benefit from a bit of disrespect and discord.

But there is some truth to what he says, isn't there? And maybe it's exaggerated, but it does seem to me that the core of his concern is valid. This is the sort of celebrity gossip that's going to spread like wildfire across the empire.

All the other nobles' wives are there with Vashti at the banquet. They've seen this refusal. This isn't a secret. This isn't a private refusal. Much is made of the efficiency of the postal system that Xerxes is going to use to disseminate his laws and commands at various stages.

I suspect the official post of the empire has nothing on the rumor mill. This will fly across the empire, and who knows what the story will become by the time it's on the other side of the world.

History shows us that seemingly small events can have massive consequences, can't they? A little thing that changes everything. Alexander Fleming sees the mold growing.

[ 30 : 20 ] Rosa Parks sits on a bus. Small things that have big consequences. Xerxes is backed into a court, and so the empire strikes back.

Vashti is banished. Xerxes is so insecure that he cannot handle a woman who stands up to him, and so he just pushes the problem away. And this...

Shush. And this abuse of power, it continues on into chapter two, doesn't it? This contest to find a new queen.

I think contest is hardly the word, is it? None of the competitors is going home afterwards. This is a wholesale roundup. All of these women consigned to a life of who knows what in the king's harem.

Some maybe secondary wives, some as favored concubines, and some who will never see the king again and just live out their lives in an utterly meaningless round of nothingness.

[ 31 : 26 ] That's what they're being consigned to. And the fact that with the economic systems of the day, the potential allure of the power of being queen, I suspect at least some of these young women and at least some of their families were probably at least willing, if not pleased, to have the girls go off into this, well, secure, safe position.

Okay, not very fulfilling, but at least there's going to be food on the table and a roof over your head. But the fact that this is on some sort of level voluntary doesn't really change things, does it?

The system that makes that in any way attractive is itself abusive. This is an abhorrent process, isn't it? It's not just the most extreme beauty contest ever, is it?

It's several steps beyond that because the determining factor is not a catwalk performance, but a bedroom performance. If you want to demonstrate your absolute power, this is pretty convincing, right?

Nobody says no to this man. And by the way, it's not only the women of the empire who are suffering. I mean, I don't want to diminish the horror of the roundup. And by the way, when we say young women, you probably want to knock a few years off the age you're assuming there.

[ 32 : 43 ] But it's not just the young women. Several references in this account to the king's eunuchs. You know, the historian Herodotus, he reports 500 young boys each year, rounded up and castrated to serve as eunuchs in the Persian court.

I know who's getting the worst deal, but nobody's getting a good deal here, are they? This is about power, completely unchecked. The man who does whatever he wants. So folks, if you have ever been tempted to feel an ounce of sympathy for Xerxes with his disobedient wife, well, get that right out of your head.

This is a horrible, abusive man. But it doesn't have to be this way. The New Testament sets out for us a pattern whereby husbands love their wives and give themselves up for her.

And even more than that, not just the commands of the New Testament, but the example of Jesus. Consider the contrast, the pride, the hubris of Xerxes, who causes countless others to suffer for his pleasure.

Against that pride and hubris we have the humility of Christ, who suffered for the sake of others. Against King Xerxes, who summons his bride to the feast in order that others might gaze upon her, that she might be diminished.

[ 34 : 10 ] Against that we have the promise that we will be invited to a feast, invited to a feast as honored guests, as a bride dressed for her husband.

We will feast in the house of Zion. King Xerxes, he chooses the most beautiful of women and he treats them as objects to serve his pleasure in every possible way. God takes those who are by nature completely unattractive, unlovely, and gives himself up for us to make us beautiful.

When we were still dead in our transgressions, Christ died for us. What a contrast. What a savior. So, so much for Xerxes.

What of Esther? And Mordecai for that matter. We're not really going to dwell on Mordecai, but much of the same things are true. What about Esther? What do you think, Jill?

Are you going to hold up the Esther of the Bible as an example for your Esther and Naomi? Will we challenge one another? Dare to be an Esther? Hmm.

[ 35 : 21 ] She's not an easy one to pigeonhole, is she? Daniel, not a dissimilar context. He places his Jewish identity on full display. Esther deliberately hides hers, verse 10, and keeps doing so even when it's comparatively safe to reveal, verse 20.

Of course, that hidden identity implies she is not keeping the food laws. She's not observing the Sabbath day because they would be pretty big giveaways, wouldn't they? Hmm. And no record that she resists this process.

This process that she knows is going to result in her being called to the bedchamber of a pagan king to whom she's not married in any regular fashion. Now, her culpability for that is decreased by her limited, at best, choice in the matter, and her culpability reduced by the fact that she is something kind of close to married to him, at least in the sense that she's never going to be the wife of any other man afterwards.

And then there's a passiveness to how Esther's described in chapter 2. She was taken. She was put under the care of Haggai, having previously been put under the care of Mordecai.

There's something that absolves her of blame in the fact that this kind of happens to her. And yet, verse 9, once she's in this situation, she won Haggai's favor.

[ 36 : 47 ] Now, that's a lot more active. Verse 15, she won the favor of everyone. She goes and she seeks Haggai's advice on what to take with her. Shrewd maneuvering because she wants to succeed in this situation?

I think so. And then, once she's in the royal residence, well, what are we supposed to suppose results in the fact that in verse 17 the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women?

That she wins now the king's favor too? I mean, this morning we were thinking about not getting carried away with hair and jewelry and clothing. Here's Esther with her year-long beauty regime.

Dare to be an Esther? When in Rome, do as the Romans do? Is that defensible? Surely there's limits to that? See, one of the challenges of preaching from the Old Testament is that it's rarely as neat as we want things to be, is it?

I mean, Paul's pretty good at a logical argument. We might not like what he says all the time, but we at least know what lesson he wants us to go away with. But these narratives of the Old Testament, they're not like that.

[ 37 : 58 ] because they're filled with actual people who do the things that people do and people are messy. Life isn't neat and tidy.

Sometimes right and wrong are clear and we'll see some of that next week, but often the path is much less apparent. Sometimes things are shaded in gray. So I'm not going to call Esther's participation in this contest virtuous, but I don't think I'd call it sin in and of itself either, nor the ways that she plays the system, if you want to call it, that winning favor and so on.

But to conceal her identity with this linked failure to obey God's commands, well, that I think is clearly sin. Bad advice from Mordecai and Esther's wrong to follow it. But the rest of what she does?

Sometimes the Bible describes without prescribing, not everything that the heroes of the Bible do is good. Not all of it is a positive example to follow. But folks, here is what is clear.

God is at work behind the scenes. God's name isn't present, but when we read this book in the context of the rest of the Bible, we know what's going on here, don't we? God is achieving what he intends.

[ 39 : 18 ] Not achieving it through spectacular miracles like Moses and the ten plagues. He's achieving it through the ordinary and the everyday. Think about the sequence of events that we go through in these couple of chapters.

Why did Vashti throw away her position for what was only ever going to be a futile gesture? Why did Xerxes make such a stupid demand in the first place?

Why was his response to her refusal quite so extreme? And so on, and so on, and so on. Now these events are explicable. We can see why people would do these things.

They do make sense on a human scale. And I imagine that looking on, seeing these things happening, the Jews of the day would not have had much idea that God was working out his purposes through these events.

I don't think you hear, Vashti refused to come to the king and think immediately, oh, that's God's plan. We see from the outside. We know he's at work invisibly behind the scenes.

[ 40 : 19 ] We know how the rest of the story unfolds. But the number of things that happen just so. See, the ordinary providence of God moves flawed and sinful people into just the right place at just the right time.

And it seems to me that we live in these kind of days. We don't see the miracles that marked the days of Elijah or Jesus' life on earth.

We live in the ordinary everyday where kings and prime ministers and presidents make their decisions according to what suits them, according to what seems right to them, according to what is convenient.

We live in a day when, like Vashti, people do small things that turn out to have massive consequences. And the fact that we cannot see God's hand at work does not mean it's not there any more than it did in Esther's day.

God is at work. And he's at work even through morally ambiguous and, frankly, sinful people. And that is a very good thing. Anthony Tomasino, he says, if it were not for God using human misbehavior, he would have precious little to work with.

[ 41 : 37 ] That's certainly true of the morally ambiguous Esther, a history of sin and compromise. It doesn't disqualify her from being used by God.

Even her sin is factored in to God's providential plans. We'll see next week she is in place for such a time as this. And that is a reason for great hope for you and for me.

Because that label, morally ambiguous, it fits most of us pretty well, doesn't it? Most of us can look back on decisions that we wish we hadn't made.

On paths we wish we hadn't walked down. Most of us can think of things we've done that, in retrospect, we know it was the wrong decision. Well, maybe something that you did many years ago.

Maybe you knew when you did it that it was clearly sinful and contrary to God's will. And you know that he's forgiven you. You believe the gospel, right?

[ 42 : 44 ] You know it's true. Jesus' blood is sufficient to cover our sins. And you cling to that. And yet, still, if you're honest, you wonder, can he really still use you to do good things?

Given that past compromise, given that past sin, given sometimes the ongoing effects of that past sin, given that compromise, can he still use me?

Maybe, maybe as a believer, you married someone who wasn't, knowing fine well that the Bible says not to do that. Maybe you, you pursued a career in your youth deliberately seeking out great riches, knowing that it wasn't what God said was most important.

Or a job that you knew was going to result in ludicrous working hours that leave no time for anything else. Maybe you regret these choices. Maybe you wonder whether God can still use you. Maybe you feel like you have wasted a lifetime walking down the wrong road.

Now, folks, I'm not saying it wasn't sinful. Wrong decisions don't suddenly become right. But we still say God is sovereign even over such things.

[ 43 : 59 ] My friends, such is the majestic power of an almighty God. Almighty, omnipotent, whatever he chooses.

Such is the power of an almighty God that he can be sovereign even over such things. that he can really ordain all things for good.

Even those things. See, God uses messed up, morally ambiguous people like Esther to do amazing things.

God uses messed up, morally ambiguous people like you and like me to do amazing things. let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the people in this story. We thank you for the examples that are here for us of the depth of human depravity on display and even of the compromise and questions of someone like Esther.

[ 45 : 16 ] Lord, we thank you for the hope that you offer to us. The hope that you can use such flawed people. And so, Lord, we pray that you will work in our hearts that we will be ready, that we will be eager to be used by you to work according to your will.

Whatever lies in the past that we will today be those who live and work as you intend and for your glory.

Amen.