

ESTHER

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[0 : 00] One television personality who was having a pretty rough year found out on the same day that she was losing her TV show and that her husband was leaving her.

She responded, I know the Lord won't send me more trouble than I have the strength to bear, but I do wish he didn't have such a good opinion of me.

Many of us might know that feeling. I've heard people say on a number of occasions over the years that the things that have really happened to me lately have really shaken my faith.

That is, at times when there's bereavement, serious illness, times of tragedy, or even just a whole string of negative things happening, it's hard to believe in a God who is love and a God who is in charge or rules the world, as we sang tonight, God who is sovereign.

And it is an important thought. It's a really serious question. Many sceptics would say that belief in an all-loving and an all-powerful God is just simply wishful thinking.

[1 : 06] You can't have both of those things together in the world in which we live. Some even go as far as saying that they refuse to believe in such a God unless that particular God was to turn up and to fix certain things in their life.

And the assumption is that God has to think like I do about the world and solve my problems or the world's problems in the way that I think that they should be solved.

Now, I get why we might say that, and I get the feeling behind that and the sentiment behind that, but in the end it would be a pretty benign God if that God was limited to my understanding of the world and how I think things should be fixed in the world.

Over the next number of weeks, we're going to go back two and a half thousand years into the book of Esther, which we're just looking at now. It was read out a couple of chapters just then.

Here, two and a half thousand years ago, is one of the most perilous times for the people of God. They are on the brink of extermination. And on the surface, when you read those first couple of chapters, it appears that this is one of those Cinderella stories.

[2 : 18] You know, orphan girl rises to be the queen of Persia, most powerful nation in the world at its time. But it's actually not the thrust of the story.

It's actually about how God saves his people from the brink of disaster. And yet, there is no mention of God in the book of Esther at all.

Not once. Kind of strange, really, when it's about God rescuing his people from the brink of disaster. So why is that?

Why is God not mentioned in this book? Now, I'm pretty sure it's not an oversight. It's not like the writer got to the end, full stop, and went, oh, my hat, I forgot to mention God.

I don't think that's the case. I think the writer here is making a point. And I think, let me just try and explain this. You see, whenever the God of Israel saw his people in trouble in the past, he comes to their aid through extraordinary ways.

[3 : 24] The events are extraordinary. But in Esther, there's no mighty miracle. There's no vision. There's not even a dream. God appears to be absent here in this book.

Totally silent. There are, however, this whole string of apparent coincidences. They all happened at the right time.

And if they hadn't have happened, the Jews would have been wiped out. But they all happened in the right sequence at the right time. And they were saved.

If Xerxes, just from chapter one and two, if Xerxes had not gotten drunk and he had not made that boast, if that hadn't happened, Vashti would still be queen.

And Esther wouldn't have been queen. And she couldn't have used her influence to save the Jews. What if, for instance, Esther hadn't been pretty?

[4 : 29] What if the king favoured one of the other girls? The whole narrative all the way through is, what if, what if, what if, what if? And all of them are just these ordinary little things, everyday life.

And by themselves, they don't seem to be significant at all. And here's the point that I think is underlying here through Esther. When you see one of the ten plagues in Exodus, where God uses his mighty power to rescue his people from Egypt, and you see his hand at work, you go, oh, that's God.

Yeah. Extraordinary. When you see the king drunk, you don't go, oh, wow, God at work. You just don't make that connection.

Esther is telling us, I think, when you put it all together, don't make the same mistake. Don't make the mistake of the materialist who judges situations based on what they see and what they feel and what they can experience firsthand.

We may not see God at work, but that doesn't mean he's not. God's silence is not his absence.

[5 : 44] His hiddenness is not his abandonment. God is not obsessed with appearances the way that we are. He's working out his promises even when it appears that he's not even around.

That's one of the underlying themes right through Esther. There are things going on for us, even for us right now, things going on for us in our lives that we're looking right at, things that God is doing, and they seem so ordinary and we have got no idea, which is why that graphic that Yui put together is just so brilliant.

Did you notice the invisible hands under the woman? Ooh, it all makes sense. And even in the ugliness of these first two chapters, and frankly, they are ugly, there's a whole lot wrong here.

God is at work. He's even using flawed and failed and questionable people like Esther and Xerxes to bring about his plans and his purposes. So let's just launch straight in on chapters one and two. The book of Esther, if you've got your Bibles open, begins introducing us to the great empire of King Xerxes I. It says, notice how it reads, it says, verse one, this is what happened during the time of Xerxes.

[7 : 08] And you say, Xerxes? Which Xerxes? And he says, well, the Xerxes have ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Kush.

He reigned from 486 BC to 465 BC. And his empire included the north-western part of India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, northern Greece, Egypt, Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

a pretty big area he covered. There was no person more powerful, more greater on the face of the earth at the time, and he knew it.

He was not a modest man. Sort of like the first president of Tunisia, Habib Burugibi, he once explained to his National Assembly that leadership abilities such as his were, and I quote, a miracle of nature that rarely occurs in our history.

Do you like that modesty? Isn't that nice? He was also asked once, so what's the Tunisian system of government? System of government?

[8 : 39] I am the system of government. Isn't that a modest sort of man? So Xerxes is that kind of guy, and he holds a party for all of his main men throughout his whole empire so he can show off how great he is.

It's a party, verse 4, in chapter 1, that says, it went on for a full 180 days. He displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendour and glory of his majesty.

He got all of his wealth, all of his possessions, his livestock and all that sort of stuff, and he's in the big banqueting hall with all his head honchos, and it's just, he's marching it through the banquet hall.

And it took six months from the beginning to the end for all of his possessions and wealth to be shown off to all his mates. And at the time, they're sitting there drinking wine.

It's no wonder he got drunk. Six months of it. We are meant to gaze wide-eyed here at the gold and the silver and the jewels and the sheer accumulation of wealth and power in exactly the same way that Alexander the Great did when a hundred years, just about a hundred years later, he went into the citadel of Susa and he discovered over one and a half tonnes of gold alone, let alone the piles of silver and the jewels and everything else.

[10 : 08] And Alexander the Great looked at it and went, my goodness. Even Alexander the Great was impressed by this guy. So, we read the first few verses and we go, who's the main man?

Who's in control here? Who's in charge? Xerxes except he's got a woman. Queen Vashti.

Now, she has been given a separate banquet over here for the ladies. And as there are no ladies to civilise the men, Xerxes' party gets out of control.

Verse 10, Xerxes is in high spirits from wine. I think that's meant to be an understatement there.

The guys had one too many for sure. And he decides it's time not just to show off all of his wealth and all of his splendour and all of his majesty and all of his power, he wants to show his mates that he's also married to the best looking woman in the world.

So, verse 11, he says, bring Vashti out wearing a royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the nobles for she was lovely to look at.

[11 : 32] He's not wanting to show Vashti off. He's not wanting them to meet her, to be friends with her, to see whether she's got a personality or anything like that.

It's, bring her out so that my drunken mates can drool over her and gawk at her. Now, for reasons that the text doesn't explain, she decides that that's not a great idea.

I mean, it's not hard to imagine why. She refuses to come and that act in itself is an act of incredible bravery. in a hierarchical shame and honour culture for an authority like Xerxes to be rejected was a cultural crisis.

and this king is furious with his queen but instead of marriage counselling he has a cabinet meeting to work out what to do with her.

And of course he pulls in all the nobles, all the head honchos, they're all concerned as well because what if Vashti sends a priest in here and our wives do the same thing? Anarchy will reign, we'll get a bit of pushback from our wives.

[12 : 48] The outcome of it all is that Vashti's banished a royal decree went to the whole kingdom in all different languages from India right through to Sudan so that everyone heard it in their language all the women will respect their husbands from the least to the greatest.

What an idiot. What an incredible comical overreaction. a drunken reaction and then beginning of chapter two the grog's worn off so Xerxes wakes up with a headache and did I do that?

Yes you did. And he just realises that Vashti the most beautiful woman that he'd ever met is never to approach him again ever.

and so he needs a new trophy wife and the whole kingdom is searched for the best looking woman. Chapter two verse eight suggests that they weren't invited to apply they were picked and they were taken.

I mean you couldn't imagine too many clear thinking women wanting to marry a guy like Xerxes could you? Although Donald Trump seems to be sorry and so we have international beauty pageant Miss Persian Empire 482 BC some scholars have suggested there is many 1,000 virgins were brought back to the king's harem.

[14 : 34] and then for a year they underwent beauty treatments and they were in training to get ready for one night with the king.

Everything turned on that one night with the king and depending on how it went there were only four possible outcomes only four number one is that in the morning he goes I didn't really like her and he would send the girl away to be a permanent concubine but he would never ever ever call on her again and at an age of 18 or 19 they were essentially banished to permanent widowhood they were never ever to be allowed with another man no marriage no children no nothing permanent banishment no second option was he might say actually I don't mind that one she would become a concubine and occasionally at his whim and his will and depending on how much wine he's had he would call on her third option is if he you know if you're really really really lucky you might be one of the two or three that would go on the list that I might marry this one and then your children would be inheritors of royal stuff number four if you are super fortunate and you're the one that he most favours you became the queen and the other 999 weren't now one of the girls who was taken was a Jewish orphan named

Esther and when they took her her older cousin Mordecai instructed her not to say anything about her Jewish identity or about her beliefs she was the one Xerxes favoured above all of the rest he married her and he made her his queen the Jewish orphan girl becomes the queen of the greatest empire of the face of the earth so what's going on here what's going on this is not marriage advice so let me just take that bit out it's not marriage advice it's not how to hook up and not any of that sort of stuff not dating advice in Persian culture the most important thing about a man is his wealth and his power and the most important thing about a woman is her sexual and physical beauty a man's worth was determined by the size of his wallet and how big his muscles were and a woman's worth

was determined by the size of her dress isn't it ugly when you realise that's what's going on in here in

S's one and two isn't that ugly the way that people are treated look at the way these women are treated look at the pride and the arrogance of this bloke Xerxes wouldn't it just be absolutely terrible to live in a culture that judged people like that and treated people like that aren't you glad that we don't live back then two and a half thousand years ago with all the superficial differences what's changed what's really changed the world's the same it says external image appearances matter more than your character what you have matters more than what you are beauty talent money connections influence matters more than what you are and what our culture says is that you must undergo beauty treatments not just the women our culture says that unless you get these credentials this kind of beauty this kind of money this kind of resume this kind of education this kind of job unless you get these things you don't really amount to much you're not really worth much it says it differently to men and to women and to different races and to different classes but it's basically saying the same thing it's saying that you need to go through the beauty treatments of this world you need to perform you need to do all this and if you do then we just might accept you we might approve of you that's all of us we live we live in a world of appearances and performance we elevate the trivial in our culture whole magazines are devoted to the antics of soap opera stars and we pay incredible amounts of money to grown men who hit little balls around we live in a culture that considers the car we drive as an extension of who we are we're more impressed by the school that someone attends than what they're actually learning at the school we blow it just like these couple of chapters in Esther we blow it just like

Esther does herself and most scholars agree that in these first couple of chapters here Esther has completely sold out to the culture she's not a hero here she gets to her pinnacle through absolute compliance she does what Mordecai says she listens to the head guy in the harem more than any other woman there she did everything that he asked Esther plays the Barbie doll here she's the sex kitten here she's a blank page on which these men write what they want and she's the total opposite of Daniel and his friends you see when they were brought into the pagan court they said up front that we're here we will serve but we will follow God's dietary requirements they let everyone know that they were Jews and were still going to follow God's law

[21 : 12] Esther kept that stuff secret and she must have broken law after law after law and then she sleeps with a man who she's not married to and then she marries an unbeliever all were gross violations of the biblical law she's completely sold out but what is great about Esther is that although there is this bad start by the end she's the brave heart God works with her God is patient with her and grows her and turns her into something great and the reason why that is so important is that no matter how bad you have screwed up at the beginning of your life no matter what terrible moves you've made and things that you've done you can never write yourself out of God's final script the good news is and this is the message of the Bible is that

God does not bless those and save those who live moral and exemplary lives that's not what God does the message of the Bible is that God persistently and continuously gives his grace to people who don't ask for it don't deserve it and don't fully appreciate it when they receive it despite of the fact that we are into a great degree influenced by our systems our culture's systems of values and morals God hasn't given up on us 1 Samuel 16 says that man looks at the outward appearance but God looks at the heart you see real beauty is different than what this world says it is unlike God we judge books by their cover

God doesn't do that our world is like this chauvinistic tyrant Xerxes and it says to us I'll accept you as my bride but you have to work incredibly hard and you have to make yourself attractive and you have to come up with an incredible resume and make yourself lovable and then I might approve of you then I might approve of you and it is exhausting it is crushing and there's only one way out God says over and over again to us in the Bible that he wants to be our spouse he's not just the all powerful king but the all loving husband what makes it so great is that it's not about what we have to do to make ourselves so lovable and good and worthy

God is the exact opposite of Xerxes Esther doesn't have a great start here and yet God has got her by the hand God never gives up on her as this book unfolds God is patient with her he loves her and he turns her into something great and that is the foretaste of the relationship with Jesus that Ephesians 5 talks about Ephesians 5 uses the image of the loving husband this is the way God treats us it says husbands love your wives just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for

her to make her holy cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish but holy and blameless that's what

Jesus does for us Esther was accepted by Xerxes because she was already beautiful but Jesus loves us in spite of our flaws and our sin and our ugliness in order to make us beautiful Esther had to give her life and her freedom up for the king but Jesus is the only king the only spouse who gives up his life and his freedom for us he gives up everything for us not because we are lovely but in order to make us lovely in order to make us beautiful and when we understand that when that shift happens I think we have the three things that we need to be free from our cultures enslavement to external appearance and performance firstly when you understand what Jesus has done for you you get a real definition of beauty our culture's definition of beauty means that we cannot go by a mirror without noticing ourselves selfie culture has dominated

[27 : 12] Facebook but then we see Jesus and he had ultimate beauty infinite glory infinite splendour infinite majesty and he laid it to one side Ephesians chapter 2 sorry Philippians chapter 2 he laid it to one side gave it all up he became human and he went to the cross the book of Isaiah says talking about him being on the cross it says he had no beauty that we should desire him he became cosmically unsightly his father turns his face away Jesus gave up his splendour his majesty and his beauty for us that is true beauty genuine beauty is not self obsession it is self sacrifice that's the new definition of beauty you get from Jesus the second thing we get when we understand that Jesus gives up everything for us to make us beautiful in his sight is a new experience of our beauty to him

Nat and I were married about 17 and half years ago and I still remember the day I remember standing at the front of the church and looking to the back of the church about this kind of distance of the doors over there and seeing Nat appear in the door trying to wait for the other bridesmaids to get out of the way and seeing Nat appear in the door and I thought she was stunning do you know why makeup now just bear with me here for a moment let me finish not just makeup the dress as well now I think my wife is beautiful and in fact she's more beautiful to me now than what she was then but and the point I'm trying to make is I've married a lot of people in over 20 years of pastoral ministry every person that I marry comes down the front every bride that I marry looks better on the day that I marry her than the day that I was doing marriage prep with her that is that's the point of makeup and dresses and stuff isn't it is that not the point the point is that you know all the makeup and the fancy all the goop and the fancy clothes and that sort of stuff it takes people up a notch in appearance now if you think that I could have spent a little bit more time on that you should have seen me at six o'clock this morning a number of all the imperfections and the flaws that I'm self conscious about have been covered up they've been hidden they've been worked on the point is that when Jesus uses the metaphor of us being his bride one of the things that he has in mind is that in spite of all of our spiritual flaws in spite of all of our failings in spite of all of our sins he has clothed us with his righteousness he has surrounded us with his own beauty that he has given us he has so cleansed us from our sin that when he sees us he goes wow that's awesome that is awesome his heart bursts at the sight of us to the degree to the degree that you know that that is true of you in his eyes you will be set free from our culture's enslavement telling you what you must look like what you must have and what you must accomplish in order to be accepted when you realise that you are beautiful beyond comprehension in his eyes because of the work that he's done for you so you get a new definition of beauty you get a new experience of beauty and the third thing you get is a new understanding from Jesus in making us beautiful a new understanding of the hardships and the trials and the difficulties that you face this is taking me back to the beginning there are plenty of things in this world that will cause us to question his existence God's existence God's power and his willingness to intervene in his love for me plenty of things and there are plenty of parts of the Bible that talk about suffering and hardship refining those Jesus loves and the imagery of the Bible is of gold being refined and the impurities being burned up in a furnace you see once you're assured of God's love and really assured of God's love love when you understand that you are beautiful in his eyes and he bursts at the sight of seeing you then when you go through troubles and hardships you start to see that it's actually purifying you making you more beautiful to him that's what it's doing it's making you more beautiful on the inside God hasn't actually abandoned you he uses the refining process to get rid of pride and foolishness and fear and all the other sinful stupid things that we do bit by bit he is making you more and more beautiful

to him once you are assured of

God's love then you see the hard times as God's spiritual beauty treatments and when you go through the hardships with absolute assurance that you are beautiful in God's sight you actually start to become beautiful in your heart on the inside just like pressure creates a diamond God has not abandoned you in his troubles he is at work leading you and holding you and refining you and saving you making you more beautiful in his eyes for the day when he will see you face to face of the great wedding banquet where he will enfold you in his arms and love you for all eternity and so if that's you right now trying to not sure whether or not he loves you can I just get you to look to Jesus and can I have Romans 8 floating around in your mind we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose

[34 : 03] Amen