

The First Miss Universe Pageant

(Esther 2:1-23)

(preached 1/7/14; Pine Grove BC Wed PM)

Introduction

Many of you know the name Harrison Ford from his career in movies.

He was Indiana Jones, the president in the movie Air Force One.

He also starred in Patriot Games and a number of other movies in his career.

But he really got into show business with all the Star Wars movies.

Where he played the part of Hans Solo in the first 3 Star Wars movies.

However, many of you may not know how he landed that part.

Though Ford had always wanted to be an actor, but he never could quite break through in the late 60s and early 70s.

He landed a few small roles, but when he got married and had two kids...

His job as an actor just wasn't paying the bills.

So, he decided to pursue a more stable career as a carpenter.

It just so happened that Ford was called upon to build cabinets for George Lucas.

His work impressed Lucas so much that he asked Ford to do some work on the set of a movie that he was directing....

And the name of that movie was Star Wars.

Lucas knew that Ford wanted to be an actor, so while Ford was on set building props...

He called him over and asked him to read some lines for one of the characters in the movie.

That character was Hans Solo, and the rest is history.

And there are countless stories like that in the world.

Where people are simply in the right place at the right time.

Bill Gates just happened to attend a school that was one of only two in his state that purchased one of the first computers.

There have been major league baseball players who became stars when someone simply noticed them while doing other things.

From a human perspective, we call this good luck.

We call it coincidence.

Yet, from God's perspective, nothing is happening by chance or coincidence.

Even the lives of unbelievers are under the sovereignty of God.

And this happens day after day.

And has been happening day after day since time began.

Now again, we operate from a human perspective as we look at the world.

That's why we are tempted with jealousy and coveting.

Because we think that fame and fortune would make us better people.

When in fact, the opposite is more likely.

There is a show on TV entitled, "The Lottery Ruined My Life."

And the truth is that it does for many of the people who win it.

Our eyes look with envy, but for most people, their prayers should not be "God please let me win the lottery..."

But rather, "God thank you for not allowing me to win the lottery."

For most people, unlimited money means unlimited sin.

And if little money keeps me from great sin, give me just enough to make it and no more.

Now, the text before us tonight is not about playing the lottery...

But it is about knowing that God's perspective on our earthly circumstances is not always the right perspective.

You think you never get a break in life.

God knows that you are right where you need to be to serve him the best you can.

And that is not to say that we sit around and just let God have His way.

No, we get up and serve the Lord.

We obey his commands.

We strive for excellence in all things.

We try to improve our situation as God allows.

Yet in all that, we rest in the fact that we can't see the whole picture.

And we trust that God does.

So, we worship Him and seek to glorify Him whatever life throws our way.

Now, up to this point, we haven't met Esther, but we will today.

But I want to put you in her shoes for just a minute.

Now, we talked last week about Israel's history as a nation.

Esther is an Israeli; she is a Jewish girl but she is not living in Israel.

Rather, she has grown up in a foreign land all her life.

Now, this is hard for us to imagine.

So, let's say that the United States is no longer a collection of states, but that each state is its own nation.

And let's pretend that the nation of Florida gets really strong and invades South Carolina....

And takes all of us hostage.

We are transported to live in Miami for decades.

Well, that is the situation for the nation of Israel.

The Babylonians came in and took Israel captive.

So Israel lived in a foreign land for 70 years.

Now, when the Babylonian empire fell to the Persian empire...

Israel was set free and allowed to return to their land.

So in 536 BC, the first group of Jews returned and they slowly kept returning to Israel to rebuild the temple.

Now, the events in Esther happen around 480 BC.

That is 50 years or more after the Jews have been set free to return.

And the question is what is Esther still doing here in a foreign land after so many Jews have already left?

Back to the idea of Florida taking us captive....

When the governor of Florida said, y'all are free to go back.

I'm on the first bus back.

Yet, here we have Esther still hanging around.

Why is that?

Well, we are going to see tonight that Esther was an orphan.

Her parents were dead and her older cousin had taken her into his care to raise and support her.

And I say all that and give all that history to make one very important point as we begin chapter 2....

Here you have an orphaned girl....

Living in a land that is not her own.

Surrounded by people who aren't her own.

If there is ever of picture of someone who seems disadvantaged, it would be Esther.

She has a lot in common with Ruth at this point.

But the thing that both Ruth and Esther have in common is this....

The sovereign God of the Universe.

And the truth is that she was orphaned and remained in this foreign land...

Because God was going to use her to prevent Israel from being destroyed.

And before we even get started that is really lesson number one tonight....

A disadvantaged life is only disadvantaged from our perspective.

God uses people of all shapes, sizes, family backgrounds, and financial situations to accomplish His purposes.

So before you use your hard life as an excuse for sin...

Or as an excuse for all your problems...

Or as an excuse to disobey....

Know that God is fully aware of your background.

He even had his hands in your background, and he can and does use obedient people from all walks of life.

Now, with that background, let's look at chapter 2 tonight....

If you recall from last week, we met King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti.

King Ahasuerus was the king of the Persian empire and 127 provinces with that empire.

And he threw a huge party and tried to get Queen Vashti to dance before all these important officials..

But she refused.

So the king barred Vashti from his presence and passed a law that all women in the empire see their husband as master.

And with that, chapter 1 closed.

Now, chapter 2.....

I've entitled the first four verses.....

I. A Royal Pageant (2:1-4)

¹After these things when the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

Now I don't want to drag through all the history, but the words "after these things" is very important.

And here is why...

The events of chapter 1 happened in the third year of his reign, roughly 483 BC.

The events of chapter 2 will happen in the 6th and 7th years of his reign.

So, we have a 3 year period that happened between chapter 1 and 2.

And we know from history that those 3 years were a time when the king went out to war.

Though his empire was big, Ahasuerus wanted more.

So after the Queen refused him, the king does what most kings do....

He went out to release his anger by trying to conquer more land.

Unfortunately, we also know from history that he wasn't very successful in that effort.

He was actually beaten by the Greeks who he was trying to conquer.

So in verse 1, after those days, which means the days of being defeated in battle...

Ahasuerus returns home with his tail between his legs...

Yet, he returns home to no queen.

At a time when he needed companionship, the verse says that he had banished his companion from his life forever....

So once again, he turns to his friends...

Verse 2.....

² Then the king's attendants, who served him, said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. ³ Let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to the citadel of Susa, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given them. ⁴ Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti." And the matter pleased the king, and he did accordingly.

With that, we see the idea of the world's first beauty pageant.

The kings' advisers say, lets gather all the women together....

Have a contest with this very important difference.

The winner doesn't get a sash and red roses, she gets the king.

A king who likes to show you off to his friends and is usually gone for long periods of time fighting wars.

Sounds like a great husband. Right ladies?

And if you lose, you become a part of the king's harem.

Which means that you would be an unofficial wife, who could never marry anyone else.

And you would simply live a life at the disposal of the king whenever he needed you.

And I know that sounds awful, but that is the picture of how this empire viewed women.

They were objects to be used, abused and discarded.

That's why Jesus did so much to elevate women in his ministry.

And biblical Christianity (key word BIBLICAL) should also elevate the world's view of women.

Paul writes in Galatians 3:28....

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

But that was not the view of Ahasuerus and his advisers, so they set the plans for their beauty pageant in motion....

But we read in verse 5....

That although there is going to be a royal pageant...

God is also working out....

II. A Royal Plan (2:5-19)

⁵ Now there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, ⁶ who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the captives who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled. ⁷ He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother. Now the young lady was beautiful of form and ^[a]face, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

Paul Harvey was an outstanding radio personality...

He is probably best known for his radio segments that were entitled "The Rest of the Story."

Where he would take you behind the scenes of a famous person or event...

And give the listener a glimpse at what was really going on.

His voice would often change when he got to the important part....

And if Paul Harvey was reading the book of Esther out loud, his voice would change at verse 5...

Now, there was a Jew living in Susa....

Up til this point in Esther, it seems like a very worldly story...

A worldly king.

A worldly party.

A worldly view of women.

A worldly reaction to being rejected.

A worldly way to pick a new queen.

And then verse 5, we see the hand of God at work even in this worldly kingdom and city.

Because God has his plan to accomplish and he has His people everywhere to accomplish it through.

And even in this pagan city, we find a Jew.

And let me say this....

Mordecai should have been long gone from here.

The Jews had been allowed to leave for some time now.

Yet, he stuck around.

Maybe he liked the place.

Maybe he was not too much of a Jew.

For whatever reason, he had remained, but now we know why.

He is there to raise Esther, and they both are in Susa to play a part in God's plan to preserve Israel.

Verse 8...

⁸ So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to the citadel of Susa into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's ^[bl] palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women.

Here's the question that everyone has about the book of Esther...

Was it wise for Mordecai to enter Esther into this contest?

No.

As a Jew, Esther was not supposed to marry a pagan king.

Furthermore, it was forbidden that she was to have a sexual relationship with someone who was not her husband.

And that would certainly be required of her in this situation.

So how do we resolve this?

Well, first we never do the wrong thing for the right reasons.

We uphold God's commands at all costs, and we trust the Lord to work out His plan even if it doesn't make sense to us.

Second, nowhere does the Bible commend this act of Mordecai and Esther.

So, here is what we need to say about this situation.

Good worked good out of evil in this situation.

I am reminded of what Joseph said and we heard on Sunday night.

What man meant for evil, God used for good.

And God will work his plan out despite a poor choice made by Mordecai and Esther.

Verse 9...

⁹ Now the young lady pleased him and found favor with him. So he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and ^[c]food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem.

Even in a large group of beautiful women, Esther still stands out.

The text says that she found favor with Hegai, who was in charge of all these ladies.

And how do we explain her beauty and even her ability to make good friends with very important people?

God was working behind the scenes, even from the time she was formed in the womb.

She was a beautiful lady because God was going to use that beauty for his purposes.

And then we read something else interesting in verse 10...

¹⁰ Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make them known. ¹¹ Every day Mordecai walked back and forth in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and how she fared

There were folks in the Persian Empire who cared nothing for the Jews.

So, Esther was not encouraged to let it be known that she was a Jew.

Finally, the time came for her to go before King Ahasuerus....

Verse 12...

¹² Now when the turn of each young lady came to go in to King Ahasuerus, after the end of her twelve months under the regulations for the women—for the days of their beautification were completed as follows: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and the cosmetics for women—¹³ the young lady would go in to the king in this way: anything that she ^[d]desired was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. ¹⁴ In the evening she would go in and in the morning she would return to the second harem, to the ^[e]custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She

would not again go in to the king unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

¹⁵ Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai who had taken her as his daughter, came to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the women, ^[L]advised. And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her. ¹⁶ So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus to his royal palace in the tenth month which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

You heard that right...

It took 12 months for the ladies to prepare themselves to go to see the King.

If you live with 3 girls like me, that sounds about right.

And at the end of the 12 months, each of the ladies would go and spend the night with the king.

Again, a clear violation of God's law.

Yet, Esther's turn came in the month of Tebeth, which would be around Dec-Jan...

And it would have been in the seventh year of Ahasuerus' reign.

So this is four years after the king has banished Vashti from his presence.

And as you already know, Esther found favor with the king....

Verse 17....

¹⁷ The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ¹⁸ Then the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his princes and his servants; he also made a holiday for the provinces and gave gifts according to the king's bounty.

Needless to say, Esther was the one.

And she was given the crown that once belonged to Vashti.

And she is given a party in her honor.

And here we have the second party mentioned in the book of Esther.

At the first party, Vashti lost her crown.

At the second party, Esther is given the crown.

And that is the way that God works.

And these two parties are separated by four years.

Now, we read that and brush it aside.

We think God made it all work out in one chapter and just four years.

But lest we forget, four years is a long time in many respects.

God is all powerful but he doesn't always work immediately.

It took four years for God to put the people to bring about his plan.

Yet, that can seem like an eternity to someone in a trial and begging God to help.

But rest assured, God never sleeps or slumbers.

He is bringing about his perfect end for His people.

And he always works on His time, but He always meets our needs while we wait.

And so we have seen A ROYAL PAGEANT...

And A ROYAL PLAN...

Let's finish up chapter 2 with....

III. A Royal Plot (2:19-23)

Verse 19...

¹⁹ When the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.

No one is exactly certain of what it means that the virgins gathered a second time...

But it is important to note where Mordecai was in this verse...

He was at the city gate...

This would be the place of business in an ancient town...

Like the town square in our part of the world..

Or the café...

Or Wal Mart for many people.

The Bible just simply says that Mordecai was at the gate....

Which suggests that he may have had a government position in the kingdom...

Either way, this verse is put here to show God's hand once again in this chapter...

Mordecai just happened to live in Susa...

Esther just happened to be an orphan...

Mordecai just happened to take care of her...

Esther just happened to be beautiful...

Mordecai just happened to enter her in this contest...

Esther just happened to make friends with Hegai.

Esther just happened to find favor with the king.

And finally to close out the chapter...

Mordecai just happened to be a the gate of the city...

Obviously, none of this just happened.

God's name may be nowhere in the chapter or book, but his hand is everywhere..

Verse 21...

²¹ In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to ^[h]lay hands on King Ahasuerus. ²² But the ^[i]plot became known to Mordecai and he told Queen Esther, and Esther ^[i]informed the king in Mordecai's name. ²³ Now when the plot was investigated and found to be so, they were both hanged on a ^[k]gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.

In another act of providence in this chapter, Mordecai overhears of a plot to kill the king.

In what may have been his first good decision, Mordecai relays the murder plot to the king.

The men planning to kill him are executed.

Do you remember the homeless man from Boston who found a backpack last year...

Inside the backpack was over \$40,000!

But he turned it into police and didn't even take a penny of it.

Well, a stranger ended up raising over \$55,000 in donations and gave it to the homeless man for his act of kindness.

Well, the interesting part of Mordecai's noble act is that nothing is done to honor him for it.

This would be highly unusual in this day where acts of loyalty to the king and kingdom were often rewarded generously.

However, this will not be the last time we hear about this....

So stay tuned.

This will be an important piece of information in a few chapters.

Conclusion

So, how do we sum up chapter 2?

Most of yall know that I worked for 5 years at a little family owned BBQ restaurant.

And I think I had only been in there one time before I took a job there.

The first time I went there, I thought, “Wow, this is a really neat place.”

The food was good. The family that owned it was so nice and sweet.

Then I took a job there, and I was given a behind the scenes look of it all.

And it was a lot of hard work that went into making it a successful business.

In a lot of ways, there was a beast behind the beautiful outside of that restaurant.

In just the opposite way, we just read a beast of a chapter.

We see the poor choices of Mordecai and Esther.

We see the ugliness of how people viewed women.

But then we see the beauty that God is doing behind the scenes.

How he is taking the ugliness of our world and still bringing it all together to serve His purposes.

In many ways, God makes a masterpiece out of a mess.

And that is important for us all to remember.

You may have times in your life that are beasts, and you may have times of beauty.

But know that God is working in it all to make us more like Christ...

And to bring about his perfect plan in the world.

Amen.