

## Esther 2

### An ugly beauty contest

I don't know when they stopped doing these, but for me as a kid, one of the holiday highlights was a BBC TV programme they called *Disney Time*. I think I'd call it the classical heyday of Disney productions, when every year or two they were producing those full-length cartoon films like *Aristocats* and *The Lady and the Tramp* and *Jungle Book*.

On quite a few Bank Holiday Monday afternoons, *Disney Time* would treat us to something like 10 three or four or five-minute snippets from wonders like these. I was actually quite disappointed, eventually, when I saw *Winnie the Pooh and the Windy Day* as a complete film ... there was almost nothing new, I'd seen just about all of it, in random order, on the various *Disney Times* over the years.

I confess I started losing the plot, though, when it seemed that every Disney movie was yet another princess, even if some of them like *Mulan* and *Pocahontas* at least had conveniently different colour skins – otherwise they all seemed totally interchangeable to me.

And there is what you might call a Disney princess version of the story of Esther, and particularly the chapter we're looking at today. I have to admit that I hadn't realised until relatively recently that what we've read actually has very little overlap with *Cinderella*. You have a young girl who is gorgeous, yes:

***The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, ...***  
(Esther 2:7)

But the guy we met last time, King Ahasuerus, is no Prince Charming, and his part in this second chapter does nothing to redeem our opinion of him. Actually, there is such a dark side to this that I think we have almost preferred to hide our head in the sand about what is going on here. Yes, things were different in the Persian society of 500 BC, and what was thought of *then* as “marriageable age” for a girl is not what we would agree with *now*. But, even with that proviso, what we have here in Esther 2 is as distant as you could ever imagine from the cheesy Disney cartoons of yesteryear, with cute singing mice and talking teapots.

What we have here, I think we would say nowadays, is institutionalised child sex trafficking. And yet, amazingly, I think we also have to insist that God is at work here, in the background, at least, bringing unquestionable good out of unthinkable evil, in Ahasuerus' very ugly beauty contest.

And the writer needs to give us further background details here, too, in order to make sense of the main story to come. This is like the modern TV dramas that my Dad used to detest, starting off with three or four apparently unrelated story-lines which only later merged into one overall main story – unlike the good old days of *Dixon of Dock Green*, where the story just plods along in a more linear fashion.

So here, we're given three more elements to weave together:

- The background of the beauty contest
- The introduction of Mordecai and Esther
- the contest and the conspiracy

## ■ The background of the beauty contest (1-4)

You might remember that King Ahasuerus got into a towering rage in the previous chapter, when Queen Vashti refused to parade herself in front of the undoubtedly raucous boozy party that the King was throwing next door:

***But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.***  
(Esther 1:12)

A few very human things slip by very quickly at the start of the next chapter, which I want to just pause on and ponder over. But just how long do you think there is between the king getting angry, and ...

***After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, ...***  
(Esther 2:1)

...

If you check it out, chapter one is set ...

***... in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants.***  
(Esther 1:3)

Chapter two's date stamp is ...

***And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, ...***  
(Esther 2:16)

Taking off a year for the beauty treatments, and probably a bit more for the setting up of the arrangements, that's at least *three years* later. You might think that is an amazingly long time to cool off from his rage, and I'd have to agree. But those three years probably mark the time that the Persian army tried to invade Greece, and got thumpingly defeated at several major battles, at Thermopylae and (yes, Phil!) at Salamis. So, to quote Jeremy Clarkson on the *new* "Millionaire", *here's what I think*:

Have those battlefield catastrophes knocked a bit of proportion into Ahasuerus' head? Or were those several years of warfare just time when he had no time to attend to domestic politics?

You see, folks, there is no way that we can remain in a state of absolute fury for long. I wonder if there aren't maybe three general frames of mind that we can move onto, after the incandescence of our fury has finally chilled.

First, we can descend into bitterness, where we hold a grudge. Or we could say *nurse* a grudge. It is our *intention not* to forgive, and *not* to forget. We may hope to have a moment of revenge, or we may simply intend never to let that feeling of hostility die. From time to time, it will come to our minds again, and we will most likely quite enjoy the sensation of self-righteous spite we feel towards that person we believe has wronged us.

But make no mistake, the tables will turn. You will maybe admit that you hold a grudge, but over time it will become the grudge that holds you. You will be deformed, bit by bit, and quite possibly slowly subside into a bitter old age. You will blight your own life, and probably sour the lives of those around you, too. Expect to lose friends and die lonely, the more you allow yourself to be defined by the wrongs you still insist have been perpetrated upon your person.

The only answer to that is grace: to receive the free and undeserved gift of life by trusting in Jesus Christ, and for his spirit of grace to slowly soften the heart you have hardened.

That is one way to go. It doesn't seem to be the way Ahasuerus did, though, or at least not entirely. But another route is the way of self-deceit and selective memory. That is what I see here in what is written for us. Did you notice how it was pitched?

***After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her.***  
(Esther 2:1)

Now that word “remembered” there is a bit ambiguous. It could be that he remembered her with some wistfulness, perhaps even fondness. Maybe there is even sadness that in his rage he had signed his name to that decree, that Vashti was never to come before him again. It could be that he only really appreciates how good he had it, when she has slipped from his grasp forever.

So certainly that could be a hint to us to learn contentment in our circumstances, to be *consciously* grateful to God for the good things that we have, *while we still have them*.

But I'm not convinced that that's how to take that word here, simply because of *how* we are told Ahasuerus remembered. He remembers *Vashti's* fault (although I'm not even sure it *was* a fault to refuse to be demeaned, as her husband had so callously demanded). But there's not the slightest mention of any lack of wisdom or unfairness or impropriety on *his* part, is there? That's what I mean by selective memory.

Folks, I am convinced that our memories are not as good as we think they are. We claim that we remember scenes and words from the past with crystal clarity – and yet we also refuse to accept that someone else can have equally accurate memories that differ from our own. Folks, are you prepared to admit to mere human frailty, just once in a while?

*I am convinced that it was like this, but I recognise that you are equally honestly convinced otherwise. I have to concede that I may be wrong, or even that we may both be wrong. So all I can do is to entrust this contradiction to God who does know all things perfectly, and yield my harsh judgement to him who judges justly, and who is yet rich in mercy.*

I'm not suggesting that we always give way and back down before someone who is manipulative and abusive, and that we must always doubt the evidence of our own eyes and ears. But just see here how Ahasuerus is just gradually re-writing history so as to absolve himself of blame, and lay it at someone else's door. Always the tendency is to minimise my guilt, as the expense of someone or anyone else. Beware that self-deceit.

The only other alternative, as I can see it, is repentance. I don't see that in Ahasuerus here. Blame-shifting, for sure. Blame-accepting, not at all. Contrast that with David repentant over his adultery with Bathsheba. No pleading that *she* shouldn't have been bathing where I could inadvertently see her. Instead,

***For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight,...***

(Psalms 51:3-4)

Still, back to our story-line in Susa. Ahasuerus is back from the battle, and probably moping or even sulking. So the royal throne – and probably the royal bed – now feel lonely. But some young guys come up with a plan. *I know, this will cheer him up!*

***Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king."***

(Esther 2:2)

They even have a strategy all worked out.

***"And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti."***

(Esther 2:3-4)

Well, that would certainly take his mind off Vashti ... and the further humiliations on those several fields of battle! So, no surprises here ...

***This pleased the king, and he did so.***

(Esther 2:4)

Slight change of scene now. A way to introduce two of the three remaining major characters of the book.

#### ■ The contest (5-18)

First, Mordecai – of whom more later in this chapter, which we'll come back to.

***Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away.***

(Esther 2:5-6)

That *who had been carried away* refers, I'm pretty sure, to Kish, not Mordecai, or else that would make Mordecai well over 100. Notice the "carried away" several times there, a continual reminder that we're talking here about God's people in a distant land. In fact, the name Mordecai is derived from the name of the chief Persian so-called god, Marduk.

And yet he is introduced to us as a *Jew*. He has not lost his identity, even if he has lost his homeland. And in this far land, he still has family ... and obligations:

***He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.***

(Esther 2:7)

And if the king's decree is being carried out across those 127 provinces, I wonder whether suitable attractive girls *in the very capital city* might not have been among the first to have come to the notice of the king's talent spotters.

***So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women.***

(Esther 2:8)

But notice there that Esther is no volunteer. This is imperial law and coercion we're talking about. You might have scruples about young men being conscripted into the army, but this is conscription of young women into a situation that might be all nice and cosy to start with, but which will before long become a most intimate violation.

And also notice that Esther is ... pardon me for putting it this way ... no dumb blonde. She stood out from the crowd in the street by her appearance. She stood out from the crowd in the harem by her personality.

***And the young woman pleased him and won his favour. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem.***

(Esther 2:9)

But she, just like Mordecai, is in an alien land, and *feels* it. She cannot be *publicly* herself. Just as you and I may feel increasingly unable to be frank about our faith nowadays.

***Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.***

(Esther 2:10)

Possibly, that is a compromise, and part of the reason why God does not grace this book with the presence of his name. And maybe it's something that we need to become increasingly aware of, as the screw is tightened in our new Europe-free 2020 UK.

***“For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of Man also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”***

(Mark 8:38)

And yet ... this also works as an important part of the story-line here, too. It really is very curious! Our failures still do not undo God's grace. Somehow they are worked into his greater story-line.

So ... a year of pampering rolls past.

***Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women —***

(Esther 2:12)

Just for reference, those words “went in” clearly on various occasions in Scripture have a sexual connotation. It may be all very nice to think of this as Esther and the other girls just giving Ahasuerus a twirl in their best glad rags, but, folks, that's ancient Disney fantasy, honest.

But this Esther is also a canny lass. Here's one of the rules of engagement:

***... when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.***

(Esther 2:13)

Do you make a personal statement by your choice of “whatever” ... or do you get some inside information?

***When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised.***

(Esther 2:15)

So what starts as just one more girl, and one more visit to the king's chambers, and, on each occasion so far, one more flower crushed and tossed away into the “second harem”, most likely to be forgotten ... See, this really is seriously seedy stuff happening here!

***In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.***

(Esther 2:14)

But Esther has that something different about her.

***Now Esther was winning favour in the eyes of all who saw her. And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, ...***

***... the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.***

(Esther 2:15-17)

And Big Ben would have been specially rung for an empire-wide holiday and festivities. In the last chapter we had a royal divorce. Now we have a royal wedding!

***Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.***

(Esther 2:18)

So *Esther* in place, ready for how this big story will play out over the subsequent chapters. But there's still Mordecai to get into his place on God's chessboard, too.

#### ■ The conspiracy (19-23)

We might not have noticed, but Mordecai already has some kind of position in the imperial court. It wasn't just anyone who would have had unquestioned access like this:

***And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.***

(Esther 2:11)

And then, it just so happened, one day ...

*No!* Hold on! Things *don't* just happen. It all looks fairly normal and natural. You could imagine this happening. It's credible enough, that someone sufficiently patriotic could "just happen" to be in the right place at the right time, to overhear the germination of a plot to assassinate the emperor. That's why in schools nowadays we're all trained in our "Prevent" duty, to flag up possible incipient terrorism well before the bullets start flying.

So God doesn't need to specially speak to Mordecai in a dream, to get him to go *today* to the court of the harem. Mordecai just does it, routinely, every day. Folks, God can guide you through totally natural circumstances and habits to a specific time and place that will turn out to be lifelong significance. That one person. That one vital word, as a result of which a life will be changed, and the angels in heaven will start laying the tables for another party.

And *this* is such a day for Mordecai.

***Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.***

(Esther 2:19)

"The second time" ... we're not sure what that means. If you're an optimist, it could imply that the royal cast-offs were being returned to their home countries. If you're a pessimist, it could be another big batch of gorgeous girls arriving, because the wheels have started turning, and the message to stop sending them in hasn't yet got to the extremities of the empire. But here's the bit that is important for *this* story.

***In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.***

(Esther 2:21)

We have no details, other than that this came to the ears of the loyal man Mordecai.

***And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, ...***

(Esther 2:22)

And he did not sit on this key piece of information. Treason was responded to with what you'd expect in the way of justice.

***... and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows.***

(Esther 2:22-23)

Duly recorded in the office of public record:

***And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.***

(Esther 2:23)

But the story is just left to hang there. Mordecai does not yet seem to have been moved across the chessboard. Or perhaps this is more like some game of strategy like *Risk*, where hidden orders have been written, only to be revealed in a subsequent turn. As not fate, but *God* drives the tick of the clock and the turn of the cards of the world that he rules, even if from behind the scenes.

But some of you might say that this is an obscene claim. *How come*, you might demand, or you might even say, *How DARE you!!* How *dare* you suggest that God is behind this serial institutionalised abuse of hundreds of girls?

I'm certainly not saying that he ordered it, or approved it. But he used it. It's like in baseball, where a foul ball is bowled, but the hitter (I don't think they call them batsmen) still swings and hits the ball out of the park. The abuse remains abuse. The evil remains monstrous. But God works righteously for good. The evildoers remain responsible for their evil. But in even such toxic soil, God causes the plant of amazing grace to spring up and flower.

Think of the Cross – always a good place to go, when we face those biggest questions of our human existence. Wasn't the execution of Jesus a monstrous injustice? Callous political expediency, straightforward religious envy, and brutal depersonalising oppression unite to overrule plain and obvious justice. Even the Roman centurion on duty at the crucifixion recognised the injustice:

***Now when the centurion saw what had taken place, he praised God, saying, "Certainly this man was innocent!"***

(Luke 23:47)

The apostles' prayer lays the accusation at the door of Jew and Gentile, high and low:

***"... for truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, ..."***

(Acts 4:27)



Clearly evil. Evil, just humanly speaking. But also rebellion against God, if you remember the bit of Bible they quoted before those words:

***“Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them, who through the mouth of our father David, your servant, said by the Holy Spirit, “Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers were gathered together, against the Lord and against his Anointed’ —***

(Acts 4:24-26)

You could argue that “against the Lord” makes it an even bigger sin. And yet, paradoxically, we read on. All of these did *this*, with *this* intent, *and yet* end up doing ...

***“... to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.”***

(Acts 4:28)

Folks, the Persian empire's abuse of girls was an evil act. And the execution of Jesus Christ was an evil act. And yet the day on which Jesus Christ died is still called *Good Friday*.

And we are told that he is risen, and has ascended, and will return. And on that day all evil will be accounted for. Either we will pay individually, and be spiritually bankrupted and worse, or our sins will be paid for in that moment when Jesus cried from that cross,

***“It is finished.”***

(John 19:30)

Folks, do not let the puzzles and paradoxes of God's providence, at that ugly beauty party, or down through history more generally, distract you from the salvation that you and I need, and that is available to us all, through the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.