



JESUS IS A BETTER SAVIOR

Part 3 of Esther

Pastor Mark Driscoll | Esther 2:1–18 | September 21, 2012

Alright, I've been preaching the Bible here sixteen years. Every week I love it, and this week I'm double fired up. We're in Esther 2:1–18, looking at Jesus, the better Savior. If you've got a Bible, find that place. I love you, God's grace is with us, and thank you for being a great church that allows me to teach the Bible and yell. I am very, very, very blessed.

And if you're new, as we go through the Bible, be careful not to read it in a religious way. And the way religious people read it is this: "Oh, there are good people. There are bad people. I want to be like the good people." Here's how we read it: "There are bad people and Jesus." That's how we read the Bible, and so as we look at it today, you're going to meet some people: Xerxes, Mordecai, Esther. They all have some failures, some faults, and some flaws, and we're gonna look at how God interacts in their life.

XERXES

So here we go. You ready? You're gonna meet Xerxes first, Xerxes the Great. He's actually Xerxes the Awful, but they called him Xerxes the Great. His Persian name is Ahasuerus, his Greek name is Xerxes. Esther 2:1–4. "After these things," we'll unpack what those things are in a moment, "when the anger of King Ahasuerus, Xerxes had abated."

You ever had one of those situations where you're just angry, frustrated, grumpy? Alright, I'm Irish. I always say we have two emotions: asleep and angry. That's our options. So, some of you are more—you're grumpy, you're frustrated, you're irritable. How many of you have made a dumb decision out of anger, frustration? We all have, right? Then after awhile, you think, "Man, that was a bad idea."

It took this guy four years. Four years after he loses his temper, divorces his wife, he wakes up one day listening to country western music. He's got nobody to console him except for Jack Daniels, and Jose Cuervo, and Jim Beam. Those are the only friends left for the guy. He's totally depressed. You kind of get the picture here's a guy hitting a bottle, end of the road, not doing good, "Woe is me. What am I going to do?" The great, pathetic King Xerxes.

"When his anger had abated, he remembered Vashti." That's the wife he divorced. He's like, "Oh, I miss my wife." You shouldn't have divorced her. How many people have done that? You've been in a relationship, dating someone, marry someone, and then you just get frustrated, angry, and then you just get rid of them. And then later, "That was a dumb idea. "What was I thinking? It wasn't that bad."

Why did he break up with Vashti? Why did he divorce his wife? She told him no because he was wrong. If he would have repented, he could have kept his wife. You've always got a choice. You get to keep your spouse or keep your sin. He chose to keep his sin and lose his spouse.

"And what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's young men who attended him said—" Ahhh! Let me just say this: if you're having a hard time, and you're really, really depressed, and you want counsel, don't pursue the counsel of, quote, "young men." You will never get good counsel from young men. A lot of young guys are like, "Well, I disagree with that." Of course you would, you're always wrong. That's my point. The Bible has nothing good to say about young men. Nothing. I've read the whole book. Some of you say, "Oh, it says they're strong." So are terrorists and pit bulls, you know? It's not necessarily a compliment.

So, we'll just keep reading. It's a great story. "Then the king's young men who attended him said, "'Oh, we've got an idea. Let's got to a sorority and find beautiful young virgins,'" that's in Hebrew, "'to be sought out for the king. 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,'" Iran today, this is Persia in the ancient world, "under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch.'" You say, "Is that what I think it is?" Yep. Sad. "'Who is in charge of the women. Let the cosmetics be given them. And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti.' This pleased the king, and he did so."

He's in this depressed, despondent, discouraged place. You been there? Just that bad day where you're just—all of a sudden your life collapses and crashes in on you, and as you look at it, you really can't just blame other people. You've done it to yourself with some bad decisions, with some selfishness, with some pride, with some foolishness, with some emotional outbursts. You've done it to yourself.

And let me say this: we all get into these places because we're all sinners, and when we do, we are particularly susceptible to bad counsel. Be careful who you confide in. Be careful who you receive counsel from, especially when you're in your vulnerable moments. So, the great King Xerxes, who rules over the Persian Empire, 3 million square miles, multiple languages, nations, and people groups, the most powerful man on earth in history to that day, the richest man on earth, he's lonely, he's sad, he's depressed, and he receives bad counsel.

CHASING GLORY

How did he get into this position? How many of you would like to know how he got into this position so you could vicariously learn from his mistakes and maybe let him pay your dumb tax? Good idea? Here's big idea number one: those who chase the glory only get the misery. Those who chase the glory only get the misery. Up until this point in the story, what we have seen from King Xerxes, he lived for his own glory.

Here's what we know about the guy: he sits on a throne, he calls himself king of kings, he calls people in for a six-month party to feast in his presence and to toast in his honor, he wants his orders to be obeyed, he wants women to be brought to him, he wants gifts to be distributed from him, he wants praise to be sung to him. He's a guy who lives for his own glory. "It's only about me, it's always about me, it's totally about me." And he ends up chasing glory and receiving misery. And it's true.

And you and I, we need to know, myself included, that we are prone to this same folly. Martin Luther said, rightly, that sin is the self bending in on the self. We were made to glorify, we were made to praise, we were made to worship, and because of sin, we glorify or seek to glorify ourselves. It's about my fame, my money, my pleasure, my reputation, my wants, my hurts, my longings, my needs, and the world should acknowledge my glory and serve my glory, and we end up in misery because the glory is not fitting for us. The glory belongs to God alone. The glory is intended for God alone, and those who chase glory end up in misery, and the Bible tells this story with various characters in various ways at various times, over, and over, and over. It's the story of Solomon and many others. Whose glory are you living for? What glory are you living for? Those who chase the glory get the misery.

And he's lost. He lost his wife. You know why? Because if you live for your own glory, you will be impossible to live with. And so his wife tells him no, and she was right and he was wrong, but rather than repent of his sin, he rejected his wife.

And it says that after time had passed, so it's four years here—not only in that time had he lost his wife, history tells us outside of Scripture, through Herodotus, the father of history, that he also lost a war. See, he wanted glory. He wanted to be a king who ruled all the kingdoms of the earth. His father was the great King Darius who had established this empire that he inherited, and his father had one blemish on his military mark, and that was that his conquest of Greece failed.

He was defeated, and so Xerxes the Great decided that he would assemble the largest army in the history of the world, and that he would march from Persia into Greece, and he would conquer the Greeks, and he would supersede his father's glory, and he was defeated. I'm not saying you should see it, but it's depicted in the movie *300*. Two and a half thousand years later, we're still telling the story of this guy losing.

And to this day, there is a regiment of the Greek army, as I understand it, that still uses as their motto something that was said to King Xerxes. When he marched into Greece and was ultimately humiliated and defeated, it is reported that he told one of their Greek commanders or generals, "You need to surrender your arms," and the soldier said, quote, "You'll need to come and take them."

And to this day, that's the motto of the Greek army, and they tell this story to the kids growing up in Greek school, and if you enlist for the military in Greece, they talk about how, "Hey, we crushed Xerxes. Welcome to our team." If you chase the glory, you get the misery. And here is this man, he's miserable, he's lonely, he's defeated. He's rich, and powerful, and bored.

REPLACING GOD

Number two: when you don't turn to God, you turn to someone else to replace God. Xerxes doesn't come to his senses and say, "I'm a sinner. I need God's help." Instead of turning to God, he turns to single guys. Single guys! Man! You'd think he could afford better counseling than that. Right? Like, he basically walked into a fraternity, said, "Hey guys. Rough time for me. What do you think I should do?"

Oh, and lo and behold, what do the frat guys say? "Uh, let's find young, beautiful virgins." Same thing dumb frat guys always say. That'll fix it. Right? So, here are his wise counselors. If you don't turn to God, you'll turn to someone else. Who do you turn to? Who have you turned to? Which counselors have you received counsel from and it was foolish counsel, not wise counsel?

And as he turns to his foolish counselors, they tell him that the answer is to not turn to God in repentance, but to turn to a woman. "What you need is a wife. You need a woman. That's what you need. That'll fix it." Some guys still think this. "I'm miserable. My life is a failure. I'm not following God. It's all falling apart. I need a woman." No, you don't. You need God.

And what happens is our relationships suffer and fail because we hand to people the job description that only God can fill: never leave me, never forsake me, never fail me, always help me. People fail under the weight of being God to us. His whole life has collapsed. He's lost his wife and a war. He is a laughing stock. He is humiliated. He is denigrated. He is despairing. And he wants a woman to fix it.

I'll tell you what: as a husband, I'm guilty of this. I've done this to my wife. I've handed her a job description that only Jesus could fulfill at times in our marriage, and we do this to family, and we do this to friends, and we do this to coworkers, and we do this to our children, and we do this to our spouses, and we do this to our counselors. And ultimately, the story of Xerxes is the story of all of us to some degree on some days.

The plan is, "Let's do *The Bachelor: Persia*." That's what the frat guys come up with. You see all the frat guys sitting around the house, "Let's do *The Bachelor*. Let's have a bunch of beautiful, young virgins all come for a year at the spa to get prepared for their one night with the king, and the woman who pleases the king most shall win. This will be an amazing television drama. This will be the best reality show ever. Just the idea is already trending on Twitter. It's unbelievable. Oh, you get to be with that guy!" Isn't it amazing, though, that twenty-five hundred years later we still have reality television shows based upon, essentially, the same premise? Because the human heart never changes, though the nations, and the rulers, and the dates may.

USING, NOT LOVING

Number three: when you use everyone, you don't love anyone. And the men are choosing these women based upon their beauty, and then Xerxes will choose his wife based upon her beauty and her sexual performance. Sadly, tragically, the same thing that many men do today. "What does she look like and how does she conduct herself? And then I'll sample all of the different options that I can possibly bring before me, like a god to be worshiped in my glory, and the one that I find most beautiful and pleasurable, she gets the grand finale of being with me." All he is is a dirty American. Moving right along.

WHERE ARE THEIR DADS?

Let me ask you this too: How many of you dads read this story with me and freak out? These girls are probably teenagers. I've got a teenager daughter. I mean, this is where my head goes to scrambled eggs. Right? Like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa! What if this was my—would I let her go?" I talked to Ashley about this. I was like, "Uh, honey, what do you think about this?" She's like, "Dad, I'm not even going to Tolo." Praise God, I know, let alone to go marry some pervert who thinks he's God and the sun speaks through him while he sits on a throne drunk.

I'm reading this thinking, "Man, can't God show up and just kill people? He does it earlier in the same Book. He's—" You know? How about one of those Egyptian plagues? That flood was nice. Can we get a revisitation of the surfing opportunity? Is there not a way that we can get the road tar to come down from heaven that hit Sodom and Gomorrah? Isn't there another bucket up there that we can just sort of pour down on Persia?

How many of you dads—see, you single guys are reading this, you're going, "Mark, I don't—it seems like a perfectly legitimate idea." You dads, right, that's single guy head. Again, like, you're not the sharpest knife in the drawer, you single guys, right? And you don't understand women. You don't understand. You don't even have a woman. You don't understand women. Now, and you single guys, you're like a dog chasing a fire truck. Like, if you get one, you don't know what to do with it. That's how you are with women. You don't understand.

Now, when you become a dad, the whole world looks different. Every man looks like a terrorist with a grenade that has a pin pulled. He's dangerous and you need to get far away with your girl. Amen? Oh, I can tell, some of you don't have daughters, right? Those of you who do, you're, "Yes, yes!"

Here's the big idea: all of these gals are being paraded in. Where are their dads? What are they saying? What are they doing? And I just keep thinking this: "Somebody needs to die!" And then I realize I slept with a teenage girl, and I should die, and Jesus died, and, "Ahhh!" Back to the gospel.

MORDECAI

Okay, going right along. Mordecai and Esther, 2:5–11. "Now there was a Jew in Susa." He's not supposed to be in Susa. He's supposed to be in Jerusalem. "The citadel whose name was Mordecai." It's a derivative of a pagan god, Marduk from Babylon. That's a derivative of the name. "The son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish." All this is historical, and actual, and factual. "A Benjamite." So, he descends from the line of King Saul.

"Who had been carried away from Jerusalem." That's where God's presence lives. "Among the captives carried away with Jeconiah, the king of Judah." I'll explain all of this. It's a lot of history. "Whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther." She's got two names, and I'll explain that. "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.

"So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in the custody of Hegai, Esther—" Alright, she's got a book of the Bible named after her. Here she is. We're meeting her. "Also was taken into," where? "The king's palace." Uh-oh. Teenage girl. "And put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. And the young woman pleased him and won his favor," or grace. "And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food," cheeseburgers, wings, nachos.

"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 had not made known her people or kindred." She didn't tell him she was a Jew. "For Mordecai," her adopted father, "had commanded her not to make it known. And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her."

First of all, Mordecai. He appears fifty-two times in the book. He is, to this day, they believe buried in Iran. So, he's an actual, factual, historical figure. He is man who is living far away from God.

Let me explain this. There's a lot of history here. So, if you read the book of Daniel, what happened was God allowed a king, named here, Nebuchadnezzar, to come in to take his people as a consequence and a punishment for their sin and to exile them to Babylon. That's the book of Daniel. It gives the story of that occurrence.

And then, a king came along who was not a worshiper of God, but was a man who believed that no one should be slaves, and so the Bible commends him. It's one of the few commendations in Scripture of an unbelieving but good-ruling king, named Cyrus. And he made a decree that God's people could go free, and they were free to leave Babylon and to go back to Jerusalem.

God's people were given that land basically from the time of Abraham as their home, and they were to have a temple there where the presence of God would dwell, and they would worship God and be the people of God in the presence of God. So, to be away from Jerusalem is literally to be, at that time, away from God.

Now they were freed and liberated to return to Jerusalem and many people did. You could read about them in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. It talks about those people who went back to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and to rebuild the temple.

The question is: did everyone move back or did some people stay in Persia, modern-day Iran? They did. Mordecai's family was one of those families that didn't go. And the question is: well, should they have gone? Yes, because the prophet Isaiah gave a prophecy on behalf of the Lord that God's people in Babylon were to return to Jerusalem, and they didn't.

So, Mordecai is part of the disobedient people of God. We might go so far as to say he is part of the rebellious people of God. He didn't want to walk toward God, he didn't want to walk with God, he didn't want to worship God. So, he and his family, they stayed in the pagan country, culture of Persia, and they were compromised and worldly.

How many of you, that's your background? He wasn't an atheist, but he didn't likely tell people that he worshiped the God of the Bible, and he told Esther, "Don't tell anybody that we worship the God of the Bible." Their faith is very private, it's not public. So, they're disobeying the Old Testament, eating the food that they're not supposed to, they're engaged in the holidays they're not supposed to, they're living where they're not supposed to, they're doing what they're not supposed to, and if you ask them privately, "Do you belong to the God of the Bible?" "Yeah, we do, but don't tell anybody because we're compromised. We're lukewarm."

In our day, we would call these Cultural Christians. These are the kind of people who do believe in God, but they're possibly not truly believers, and they're not walking with God, and they're not living for God, and they're not obeying God, but they would say that they belong to God. So they're either hypocrites, or unbelievers, or rebellious. They're in some category.

How many of you, that's you? You're like, "I'm not an atheist." Are you living for Jesus? "Well, I'm not living for Jesus either. I believe in God, but the evidence wouldn't hold up in court if you examined my life." That's Mordecai. That's Mordecai.

And here he is, he does a good thing. He adopts Hadassah, Esther, his cousin. He's older, so as the closest living male relative, he adopts her. But here's what he does: he let's her go to the *Persian Bachelorette* auditions. Now, is he worried about her? Yes or no? Yeah, because it says, "Everyday he checks on her." So you get the idea Mordecai is like, "Oh, I hope she's okay . . . I hope she's okay." He's looking through the gate. "Oh, I wonder what's going on." But he doesn't say anything and he doesn't do anything.

A lot of men, particularly a lot of dads, are like that. Sometimes, we sin through commission, we do what we shouldn't do. That's what Xerxes is doing. But sometimes, we sin through omission. We don't do what we're supposed to do. Mordecai is like Adam. Adam, our first father's sin was he didn't say or do anything.

Mordecai's sin here is he doesn't say or do anything. Men, we are supposed to speak. Men, we are supposed to act, especially when it involves women, especially young women, especially our young women. Some of you guys are dads like that. You're like, "Well, she's an adult now. She gets to make her own decisions. She's dating a total loser, and he doesn't believe in God, and I think they're sleeping together, and now they're gonna move in together. And I'm really stressed out, and I text, and I call, and I check in on her, and I'm worried." Have you said anything? "Well, no. I don't want to create a scene." Have you done anything? "No, I haven't done—" Dump him! Gentlemen, dump him.

It's far more emotionally easy for me to dump a man, amen, than my daughter. Right? My daughter's not dating, praise be to God, but if she was dating a loser and she's like, "Oh Dad, you know, he sends me flowers and I feel bad." Not me! I'd be like, "You are dumped! Bye!" No crying, no tears. Don't send me flowers, don't text me. I'm not in the mood. I can dump any guy quickly, easily, between sips of something. I mean, it's not a big deal. Right? So, dads, just feel free to dump boyfriends. Right? No, no, no, no. And tell your friends no. Right?

I was talking to Ashley about this. I was like, "Argh!" Because this freaks—as a dad, freaks me out. Some nasty pervert takes my daughter for a year at the spa to compete against four hundred women with one night in bed. Okay. I asked Ashley, my sweet daughter. I said, "What would you do?" She said, "I would say no. I would run away. I would move to another country. I would throw a fit. I would be so disobedient, basically, in the palace, they would send me home." "Yes, okay. What do you think I would do?" She said, "You would fight." "Yes. I would." "First you'd try to smuggle me out of the country, or you'd hide me, or you'd declare war, or you'd storm the castle. Anything." Right?

Here's what I would not do: "Well, I hope she's okay. I'm really stressed about it. I don't know what I could say or do." Right? There's passive, there's passive aggressive, and then there's aggressive. I vote for that. Right? Men, it's your daughter. It's your daughter! Don't just pray, and feel bad, and worry. Say something. Do something. Don't let the guys make the decision for your daughters.

ESTHER

Esther, her name appears fifty-five times in the book. She's also buried in Iran. She's an orphan, she's adopted. She's likely in her teens or maybe her early twenties. Xerxes, the king, is in his mid-thirties. Hadassah is her Hebrew name, it means myrtle, which is symbolic for peace and joy. It's something that they carry in processions and pageants. Esther's her Persian name. It means the goddess of love, derivative of Ishtar. It also could mean star.

So, here's something interesting, and I don't want to read too much into the text. She's got two names. You notice that? And it puts them both, Hadassah and Esther. Well, which is she? She's both. It's as if she's a gal with dual identity. She's got a Persian name and a biblical name, and she lives in the world, but she also says she belongs to God. She is conflicted. She is a hypocrite.

That's Esther, Hadassah. She belongs to God, but she doesn't show it publicly. She says she belongs to God, but she disobeys his dietary laws in Scripture. She says she belongs to God, but she lives far away from him. She says she belongs to God, but at this point, we've never seen her pray, open the Bible, worship God, repent of sin. No indication that she has any relationship with God whatsoever.

She's passive. At this point, she hasn't spoken. She hasn't done anything. She doesn't seem to have much of her own convictions. All the decisions are getting made for her, and it's almost like her life is a river and she's just a little twig being carried by the current of the decisions of others like Mordecai and Xerxes.

How many of you are like that? Sort of a Christian, sort of a non-Christian; sort of obedient, sort of disobedient; sort of following the Scripture, but sort of not following the Scripture; privately believing in God, but publicly, no one knows; you know what the Scriptures say, but you don't do what the Scriptures do.

And it's hard with people like that, as it is with Esther. Is she a believer who's carnal? Is she a believer who's rebellious? Is she a believer who's apostate? Is she not yet a believer? Is she just a religious person? Is she a spiritual person? Is she living in rebellion against God or is she blind and doesn't even know God?

How many of you know people like that? You're not sure where they are. You say, "Well, they say they believe in God, "but they don't live for God. I don't know where they're at." How many of you, that's your story? You say, "That sounds like my story." Esther is a complicated character, and so are we. Where she's at is not always clear, and so it is for us.

WHAT WILL ESTHER DO?

What's going to happen? We've got the tension mounted, right? Xerxes has an audition, Esther's in the harem at the spa. She's got her number, she's in line. Her night is coming, the one night with the king. What will she do? What do you think she should do?

"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." They smell awesome. They smell potpourric.

“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.” So as they’re going in, they get any gift they want. What will she choose? “In the evening she would go in,” at night time.

Are they going on a date? No. Does it start with dinner, and “Tell me about your family,” “What’s your favorite color?” “Do you know how to read?” Nothing. Where do they start? At bed time. He’s like a lot of guys: “Let me sleep with you, and then I’ll figure out if I want to get to know you.”

“And in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz,” an ancient Persian rapper. “Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines.”

So, do you see this? A whole year, she’s preparing. There’s a line, let’s say, four hundred women deep. Every night for four hundred nights. You’re number 327. Your date is set on the calendar. If you please the king, you’re crowned Miss Persia, and if not, you go live in a nice room at the palace, never marry or have kids, your life is plush but pointless.

And the gals go in, and then they come out, and they all talk. “What’s he like? What happened?” You know? And can you imagine the intrigue, and the fighting, and the complicated relationships in the harem? Crazy. And the gals go in at night, and they come out in the morning. Do they have breakfast? They go for a walk? Do they visit? Nothing. You can go into his bedroom when it’s bedtime. You need to get dressed and get out of the room by the time the sun rises because he’s done with you. You may never see him again, you may never speak to him again. You’re not allowed in his presence unless he summons you.

How many men treat women like that? “I don’t want to know her, I don’t want to date her, I don’t want to love her, I don’t want to marry her. I want her to show up at night and leave in the morning, and I don’t want her to call, text, or e-mail me. If I want to see her again, I’ll let her know. Other than that, goodbye.” And what’s devastating is women in that day, like women in this day, will compete for those kinds of men. The tale turns dark and tragic, right?

“So, she would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name. When the turn came for Esther—” Ladies, what do you think she’s going to do? What do you think she should do? “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. Now Esther was winning favor,” or grace, “in the eyes of all who saw her.” Very important word.

“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.” Be careful with that word. It means everything from a man who loves his wife like Christ loves the church to how Tamar was treated in, I believe, it’s 2 Samuel 13 by a man who wanted nothing more than just to sleep with her.

“The king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor 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.” She won. Is that a good thing or a bad thing? Yes. “Then the king gave a great feast.” This guy keeps throwing parties. Bar’s open, buffet’s set, “for all his officials and servants; it was Esther’s feast.” They hadn’t had a queen in four years. Here she comes. He picked a new queen! You’re going to meet her. The media’s there, everybody shows up, national holiday.

“He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.” Everybody’s happy now, right? Xerxes lived for his glory and he ended up in misery. And he’s still living for his glory, and it’s causing misery for others. I’ll tell you, as a daddy of two daughters that I love with all my heart, all my heart, the thought of them competing for a man, performing for a man, it’s devastating. She wins, but it’s a tragic victory.

WAS ESTHER ALWAYS A GODLY WOMAN?

Here’s the question. You ready for it? Here’s the question we’re going to examine together: was Esther always a godly woman? You can debate this in your women’s Bible studies. I’m sure you will. You can debate this in your Community Group. I think you should. Was Esther always a godly woman? What do we do with this story? I wrote a blog about it. You can read it. Let me summarize it.

Here’s what’s agreed on. Number one, Xerxes is an awful man. Can we just all vote? All in favor, Xerxes is a jerk. Yay? Who votes with me? Yeah, okay. Yeah. Yeah. Like, if this guy came to my house and said, “I’d like to meet your daughter,” I’d be doing prison ministry from the inside for the things I would do to this man. Okay? No.

Number two: at the end of the book, Esther’s a godly woman. At the end, way down . . . she’s godly. She stops being passive, she starts being active. She starts speaking for herself, not just allowing others to speak for her. She starts to swim against the current of culture and not be worldly, but start to act godly. There’s a guy named Haman. He’s like the Hitler in his day, and he wants to annihilate the people of God. And she stands up, and she is brave and bold, and she takes a risk. And I don’t want to spoil the whole thing. I’ve still got a few weeks to preach, but she takes him down.

So, she ends godly. We all agree on that. She ends godly, but the question is: was she always godly? Is she basically like Jesus’ mother, Mary? You meet her, godly; see her later, godly; last time we see her, godly? Pretty much just awesome. Is she Mary 1.0? Young, godly, teenage girl.

Number three: Esther is, perhaps, the most difficult book in the entire Bible to interpret. It is, because number one, it doesn’t tell us. It says, “She went in, she came out, she won.” Huh? Well, what did she think? Don’t know. What did she feel? Don’t know. What were her motives? We don’t know. What did they do? I think we know, but we don’t know. It doesn’t give us a lot of details. Esther is told in a way that doesn’t tell us feelings, thoughts, motivations, intentions, just the facts.

In addition, it doesn’t give us any divine perspective. God never speaks, a prophet doesn’t show up. God is never mentioned. And if you go to other books of the Bible, they never mention Esther, so there’s no commentary in Scripture. And the first seven centuries of the Christian church, there wasn’t even one commentary written on Esther because everybody’s looking at it like, “Well, I don’t know. It’s like a land mine. We’ll just back away and go to Romans. I don’t know.” It’s a tough book.

So, let me say this: I like to say, “Thus saith the Lord,” but sometimes you’ve got to say, “I think.” When God is clear, we need to be clear. When it’s unclear, we need to be as clear as God is. And so what I can tell you in Esther is there are times we can say, “This is possible, but this probable,” but sometimes we can’t get beyond that.

So, back to the original question, because what I was trying to do is get you all to agree with me. So, I hope I’ve accomplished that. Now, here’s where we’re going to disagree. Was

Esther always a godly woman? There are three perspectives.

OPTION #1

Number one: Esther was always godly, amazing, from beginning to end. If you see the movie *One Night with the King*, and I'm not trying to trash the film. They're trying to tell a story of the Bible. I'm for that. Okay? But the way they tell the story, I don't think it's that great. Through the whole story, Esther's basically memorized verses of the Bible, and quoting Scripture, and leading Bible studies and women's prayer groups in the harem with all the concubines.

And then when it comes time to be with the king, she probably doesn't even sleep with him and maintains her virginity, though she has sort of a fantasy dream about perhaps sleeping with the king. So, they leave the intimation that she was like the Virgin Mary up until her wedding night, and that Xerxes really loved her and they're like Romeo and Juliet, and he's even denying other women who want to sleep with him because his heart is only for her.

And I'm like, "Eh, probably not." I don't know any guy who lines up four hundred women so he can practice fidelity. Right?

And some of the reason we tell the story in that way is there's a religious reading of Scripture by Jews, Christians, and others that is this: "There are good people, bad people. God loves good people, not bad people. God uses good people, not bad people. If God used Esther, she must have been a good person."

Well, then that's a worthless Book. If the story is, "God loves and uses good people and he doesn't love and use bad people," that's a worthless Book. If that's the story, that I have to be my own savior, I have to be my own hero, I've got to straighten out all that I made crooked. Or worse yet, if you've made it crooked, it can't be straightened out at all, because you're a bad person and God doesn't love bad people, and you've done bad things and God doesn't use people who've done bad things.

What that leads to is one of two things: pride or despair. "I'm a good person, God uses me," or despair, "It's too late. I've already blown it. I'm a bad person. I'm not Esther, I'm Xerxes. I'm not Esther, I'm Mordecai." This is a very important interpretive issue for how we approach the Bible.

And religious people who approach it, "Good people, bad people. Do good things and God will bless you. Do bad things and God won't bless you," they miss the entire message of grace, that God loves the undeserving, God loves the ill-deserving, God uses the undeserving, God uses the ill-deserving, and they miss the point that sometimes the people in the Bible are painfully normal, like us. Esther might be painfully normal.

Today, the story might be told: There was a young gal, poor, living in a big city, working a dead-end job. And *The Bachelor* came to town and she won. And she said she was a Christian but she didn't click that box on her Facebook page because she didn't want anyone to know. She might be a lot like many of us.

And what happens with that kind of religious reading of the story is then we miss all the parts about sin. So it's like, "Abraham was a man of faith—who twice gave away his wife." Oh, we missed that. That's twice too many, by the way. You're like, "Oh, Noah was a godly man, built a boat." Yeah, got off the boat, got drunk and naked. He's like the first drunken sailor. We missed that. Passed out drunk, naked in his tent like a redneck on a three-day holiday. That's Noah. Right?

You say, "No, no, there's good people in there." Who? "Well, David was a man after God's own heart." And another man's wife. Oh yeah. And he killed the man and kept the wife. You don't have to be a Christian to go, "I don't think that's right. I don't think that's right." Some of you say, "Oh, but at the end he was a very godly man." You know what he did on his deathbed? Put out an assassination hit.

Let me just submit this to you: Say Billy Graham's nearing the end. I love him. If on his deathbed, he's like, "Go kill that guy," I'm gonna be pretty bummed out, right? "Billy, you're doing great. Oh, you dropped the ball on the one. An assassination hit from your death bed?" That's what King David did.

So you know what? This really is a good Book, and even the heroes are just little "h" heroes, and they all need a big "H" Hero named God, Jesus. So, I don't believe that Esther was most likely—it's possible, but not probable that she was a godly woman her whole life.

OPTION #2

Number two, and this is a more serious view: we want to consider it, and that is that Esther was an innocent victim of sexual assault. The story is told, she's poor, she's young, she's powerless. A king commands her into the harem, she is taken against her will to sleep with a man that she has not chosen, along with hundreds of other women, and this is like trafficking. And it's possible, but let me say this: it may not be probable. If this happened to Esther, it's horrible, it's evil, it's horrific.

And Mars Hill Church exists for many things, but one of the things that is near and dear to our heart is helping women and men, one in three women and one in six men, who have been sexually assaulted. Grace and I talk about this in *Real Marriage*. Justin and Lindsey Holcomb wrote the book, *Rid of My Disgrace* to help those who have been assaulted. We have Redemption Groups to help those who have been assaulted. We have the REST Ministry to help those get out of assaulting situations, trafficking situations. This matters to us.

And that is possible, but I'm not certain that it is probable because it doesn't say that. It doesn't say what happened. All it says is she went in, she went out, he picked her. It doesn't say how she felt or whether she was forced. It doesn't say. And let me submit to you that when the Bible speaks, it speaks very plainly and very clearly, so when there are other occasions of sexual assault in Scripture, the Bible tells it.

I'll give you a devastating example is in Genesis 34 with a young woman named Dinah. The story is told that she went out and a young man assaulted her, and the story is told plainly, and clearly, and devastatingly. And so the Bible isn't shy, and the Bible isn't cowardly, and the Bible isn't timid, and when something evil happens, God shows it in its full evil. He doesn't varnish over it. He leaves it as is.

And the truth is, you just read everything with me that is said. It doesn't say that. So, I think we might be able to read that into the story, but I'm not sure we can read that out of the story. The first two perspectives are possible.

OPTION #3

It is my opinion that the third perspective is probable, and that is that Esther is not a static or flat character who's consistent through the whole book. You'll meet them. Haman is a consistent, flat character, because he never repents. He's just evil. Xerxes is a flat, static character. He never changes because he never repents.

Those who repent are no longer static, they're dynamic. They don't stay the same, they change. We call it progressive sanctification. It means that when you meet the God of the Bible, you change, and the longer you're walking with him, the more you change. And she worships Jesus. Let's just be clear on that. She's waiting for the coming of a promised Savior. So are we. She got a little bored waiting for him. So do we.

So she had a dual identity, kind of in the world, kind of in God's kingdom; kind of sinning, kind of obeying; kind of spiritual, kind of not spiritual. She's conflicted. She's got a dual identity. The Bible would say, in the New Testament, she's worldly. I believe she started out as not the most godly woman, but by the end, she's among the most godly of women. And here are my reasons.

Number one: at this point in the story of Esther, no one's walking with God. I'm not just picking on Esther. Some of you are like, "You're picking on Esther." I pick on Xerxes, I pick on Mordecai, I pick on me, I pick on you. Like, everybody gets a fair crack, right? And just because we're examining one woman doesn't mean we're criticizing all women. In the same way, if we criticize Xerxes, it doesn't mean we criticize all men, though we can, because all men are sinners and all women are sinners. And all of us, if they took the story of our life and told it in painstaking detail, we'd all be a little bummed, right?

No one in the story at this point is walking with God. No one. No one's praying, no one mentions God, no one's worshiping God, no one's tithing to God, no one is going to Jerusalem, no one is celebrating the feasts and festivals, no one's offering a sacrifice for their sin. There's nothing. Nobody quotes a verse. Nothing. Nothing spiritual. And so it's not just that Esther's not godly, no one is.

Number two: she's living far away from God. The command was given, again through Isaiah: go to Jerusalem. That's where the presence of God is. She's not there. She's living far away from the presence of God.

Number three: she's disobeying the commands of God through Isaiah and she's living in rebellion, just like we do.

Number four: she could have said no. Now, some people want to say, "Well, she could have gotten punished." Sometimes people in the Bible say no to rulers and they're punished. Sometimes people in history say no to rulers and they're punished. We call them bold. But the truth is, there's no indication that she would have gotten punished.

There was one woman who's already stood up to the king and said no, and what happened to her? She got banished, which is kind of what she wanted. Vashti said, "Tell the king I don't want to be in his presence," and the king says, "I make a sovereign decree she's not allowed in my presence." "Okay, we agree." So, she probably was sent over somewhere in the palace, away from the king. That might have been all that happened to Esther if she would have refused.

Number five: she's eating the food that the Old Testament forbids, so she's disobeying Scriptures. And there's another guy named Daniel who lived a little bit before her, and he was a young man under a godless king named Nebuchadnezzar, who's mentioned here. And when they told Daniel, "Eat the food," what did Daniel say? "No." And Esther says yes. She does what should not be done.

Here's what we do know—minimal facts. A year of preparation, goes in at night, comes out in the morning, and the king says, "She's my favorite." The Bible doesn't give us a lot of details. It doesn't paint Esther in a strong negative light, but it's a light critical light. What do you think?

How many of you, your story is like Esther's? "Yeah. I've broken some commandments. I've slept with somebody or bodies. I've hidden my Christian faith. I've kept a foot in each world. I've lived a life that is compromised and inconsistent."

Do you know what? I find great encouragement and hope in the story of Esther, because you know what? I'm like Esther. I grew up in a marginal Catholic home. My mom did love Jesus. I didn't worship God, I didn't read the Bible, I didn't pray except for when I thought I was in real trouble and I'd sort of throw out a fire insurance policy to God. "God, get me out of this please! Thanks." Occasionally, I'd show up for a Christmas or Easter service at the church, bored to death because my mom wanted me to, and it was sort of tradition.

If you would have said, "Are you a Christian?" I would have said, "Yeah," but the evidence wouldn't hold up in court. Same as Esther. Sexually sinning, doing my thing, teenager. Not an atheist, but definitely not living a relationship with God, and not growing and changing.

And I believe what happens to Esther is, in the story, God gets her heart and she has a conversion experience of sorts, and she starts to grow spiritually as a person. I experienced the same thing in my life at age nineteen. I don't want to condemn Esther. What I want to do is I want to invite everyone whose story is like Esther to meet Esther's God and to change like Esther did.

HOPE FOR GOD'S WORLDLY PEOPLE

Don't you find great hope in the story of Esther? God takes messed up people, perverted people, rebellious people, people who are not walking with him, people who are not obeying him, people who are not close to him, and he gives them grace, and he gives them favor, and he chooses them. Wow! There's hope! That's the hope. And so I have hope.

Here's a little hope for God's worldly people. Some of us are God's worldly people. Number one: like Esther, God walks with you even when you don't walk with him. Esther's not going to synagogue. Esther's not reading the Scriptures. Esther's not praying. Esther's not worshiping. Esther's not tithing. Esther's not going to the temple to offer a sacrifice and obey God. Esther's not doing that. She's not walking with God, but God's walking with Esther. Through his subtle, soft hand of providence, he's working through the circumstances of her life.

And even when she makes bad decisions or decisions are made that get her in bad situations, God's still there working it out, working with her, working on her. How encouraging is that? Some of you say, "I've not been walking with God." Good news for you, God's been walking with you. He's right there. He's not far. You've walked a long ways, but he's a committed God.

Number two: like Esther, God gives quote unquote “favor” to undeserving and ill-deserving people. It uses this word “favor” and “grace” she found in the sight of one of the rulers in the palace. Friends, this is like election. This is God looking down and saying, “I’m going to bless you, and I’m going to love you, and I’m going to adopt you, and I’m going to save you, and I’m going to help you, and I’m going to work with you.” We look and we say, “That’s not fair.” No, that’s grace. It’s undeserving, it’s ill-deserving.

Some of you look at the story, you say, “Esther didn’t ask for that.” That’s how it works. We don’t look for God, God looks for us. We don’t cry out to God, God comes for us. We don’t get what we deserve, Jesus gets what we deserve. We get grace and favor. And this is the Old Testament concept of *hesed*. It’s this Hebrew word that appears here in Esther, and it’s God’s love for his covenant people. *The Jesus Storybook Bible* calls it “the Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love.” That’s God’s love.

Number three: like Esther, God can get you through the trouble you’ve gotten yourself into. God’s not to blame for some of the decisions that Mordecai, Xerxes, and perhaps even Esther have made. They’ve made some decisions that have Esther in a very precarious situation.

How many of you are like Esther? Because of choices you’ve made and others have made, your life right now is really complicated. You’re like, “I married an unbeliever. It’s a mess. We have kids, we’re not even married. It’s a disaster. It’s complicated and I’m in situations I can’t get myself out of. I’m kind of stuck, like Esther.” Once they put the crown on her head and call her queen and sit her up front, she’s kind of stuck with it a little bit. Right?

God gets her through it. God doesn’t get her out of it, God doesn’t get her around it, God works through his invisible hand of providence to get her through it. That’s what he’s doing in your life. Even if you’ve made decisions and others have made bad decisions that get you into a difficult position, God will, by his providential hand, get you through it.

And number four: like Esther, God needs to save you before you can help save anyone else. Some of you are worried about lots of people and you want to help lots of people. You’re concerned about lots of people. God needs to save you before you can help save anyone else. Before Esther can be the one that God uses to save the people, God has to first save Esther. Change her heart, change her mind, change her life so that she can be part of his plan.

God needs to save you before he can have you help him save others. And this is by turning from sin, and trusting in Jesus, and getting a new nature, and getting a new heart, and the punishment goes to him and the new life comes to you so that you can have that conversion experience and that change in character, like Esther.

JESUS IS A BETTER SAVIOR

Well, ultimately, Esther is a type of Christ. She’s a portrait, a picture, a sign, a symbol pointing to Jesus Christ. The whole Bible is about Jesus. Now, it’s for us, but it’s about him. It’s not primarily about us, it’s primarily about him, and so at this point, they’re waiting for a greater King, and another kingdom, and a Savior, and a deliverer, and everybody and everything is yearning, and longing, and leaning toward the coming of Jesus. And so Esther is a type of Christ. She’s a little picture and a portrait.

Like Esther, Jesus comes from a line of God’s covenant people. Like Esther, Jesus grew up far away from his home, his heavenly home. Like Esther, Jesus grew up in a sinful world, filled with temptation to compromise. Like Esther, Jesus’ identity was unknown for his early years. They didn’t see him as God. Like Esther, Jesus was adopted by an earthly father, a man named Joseph.

Like Esther, Jesus grew up in poor and humble circumstances. Like Esther, Jesus was an unlikely choice for royalty. Like Esther, Jesus stood up against evil rulers to save his people. And like Esther, Jesus saves his people from death. Jesus is a better Savior than Esther, and this whole theme of king and kingdom that echoes throughout the whole story line of Esther, it’s so magnificent, it’s so prevalent, it’s so prominent.

And what happens is that Xerxes sits on a throne, but for us, Jesus sits on a throne. And Xerxes rules over a kingdom that covers many nations, and Jesus’ throne rules as a King with a kingdom over every nation. And what happens is that Xerxes has people gathering to give him glory, and when we gather as the church, we gather around the risen Jesus, a better King with a better kingdom, the one who is alone worthy of glory.

And Xerxes would send out his servants to take men and women, young boys and girls, and to bring them into his kingdom where they would be castrated and they would be taken advantage of, and when we go out, we invite people to come meet our King Jesus, and to become citizens of his great kingdom, and our Jesus never treats anyone like that. Our Jesus does not denigrate men and he does not abuse women. He’s not like that.

The good news is, Mars Hill, when we go out and we invite people to our King and kingdom, we are assured, we are guaranteed that they will be treated with love, and grace, and affection, and favor, and kindness. He’s not a God who gives their shame, he’s a God who takes their shame. He’s not a God who uses them, he’s a God who serves them. He’s not a God who discourages them, he’s a God who encourages them.

Our Jesus is a much better King than Xerxes, and his kingdom is a much better kingdom, and though Esther is a great gal at the end of the book, our Jesus is even a better Savior.

And what they do is they gather around their king. Mars Hill, we call that church. Our King is alive. They would gather around their king to eat and to drink, and gluttony, and sin. We come to Communion, eating and drinking in moderation. Not to sin with our King, but to celebrate the King who died for our sin. They would come to sing with these huge, lavish banquets the glory of their king. We come to sing and celebrate Jesus, our great King and his great kingdom.

And Xerxes’ rule was extended by heavy taxation. He forced his people to give. Our Jesus doesn’t demand, he doesn’t take. He invites. He invites those that he loves and those who love him to give generously for the expansion of his kingdom. Xerxes’ kingdom found its end in Greece, and he was defeated. Jesus’ kingdom has no end. When we give to Jesus’ kingdom, it is that the gospel would be preached, and churches would be planted, and lives would be changed across the nations of the earth, that people would meet our King, and that his kingdom would reign on the earth. Amen?

MARS HILL UPDATE

So, here’s what we’re going to do at this point. We’re going to invite you to respond to Jesus. They kept responding to Xerxes. We respond to our King. We’ll take Communion, we’ll sing, and we’ll collect our offering, and this is where we give for our King and his kingdom. And as the financial stewards are collecting the offering, can I share some good news with

you, some reports from the expanding of the kingdom of God? There's much to be thankful for.

I'll start by giving you some things to pray for, and give toward, and care for. Let me start by saying this: we love people, and we give generously so that we can love, help, and serve people. So, as the stewards are now collecting the offering, keep that in your mind. It's not about the resources, it's about the people we want to love, and help, and serve, and the resources are to be sent out to expand the work of the kingdom.

And we've had the greatest year we've had, ever. Fourteen hundred people have met Jesus and gotten baptized at Mars Hill Church in the last twelve months. It's great.

And I'll give you one story. I was talking to one of our leaders, great guy. He actually got saved in Mars Hill Church, and his wife's now teaching in women's ministry. And he said, "Yeah, I was at the gym lifting weights, and I look over and there's a guy wearing a black t-shirt that says, 'Death, Burial, Resurrection,' which is our baptism t-shirt." He walks over to the guy and he says, "Hey, do you go to Mars Hill Church?" The guy's like, "Yeah, you baptized me." "Oh." "How's it going?" The guy says, "Great! 'I love Jesus, I'm reading the Bible, I'm in a Community Group, I'm in the membership class. You know? Jesus is changing my life.'" New King. Fourteen hundred people are walking around wearing those shirts, just this year. Just this year.

And for us, we see the kingdom of God expanding. I say this not in boastful way but in an exhausted way. We were recently honored as the third fastest-growing church in the United States of America, which means we are tired. That's like a woman who said, "I'm pregnant with seven kids." Like, "Yay! Oooh." You know? It's wonderfully exhausting. So, the staff is tired, and the hours are long, and everything's busting, and we're trying to keep up, but we're celebrating because new life is always a good thing.

And so be in prayer for the churches, and I'll give you a few reports from the expanding kingdom of God. You may be aware of this. Mars Hill Downtown has now secured a lease on the oldest church building in the history of Seattle. No church has met there for five years, and we are preparing and hoping to enter in a few months and to see more people meet Jesus in what used to be, but no longer is, the least church city in America. In addition—you can clap for that if you'd like. *[Congregation applauding]*

This is Mars Hill Everett's potential new building. It's an old armory, which is awesome. And we had a vision meeting there recently, and we're trying to finish raising the money to occupy that space, to have far more seats, to expand the kingdom of God north of Seattle.

And lastly, it is official, we have obtained one of the oldest churches in Tacoma, and we hope to be opening Mars Hill Tacoma there in 2013 in a great, old building. And we want to do this because we believe our King is the best king, and his kingdom is the best kingdom, and we want to advance the King's kingdom. Amen? That's what we want to do. And things are tight, financially, and we need you to give generously.

And some of you ask, "Well, can we afford this?" Here's the truth: for Downtown, Everett, and the other facilities we're looking at, the buildings we're going into have at least twice the seating and are less money than our current rentals. So, we're getting twice as many seats for less dollars than we currently pay, because our King also does coupons and Groupons, and we appreciate that very, very, very much.

In addition, you're giving around the world. Let me show you some of the church planters you are sponsoring in Ethiopia. And we're also supporting church planters in India and other nations around the world, and we'll be giving you ongoing updated reports. And on behalf of the Lord Jesus, thank you for caring about not just our nation but his kingdom.

And I'll close with a story. It was great. I was in Indianapolis recently, preaching. And there was a line, very long line of people, and every single person I talked to and prayed with after preaching said, "Tell the people of Mars Hill Church, 'Thank you.' We get the free resources, we see what is happening." They're praying for our churches. It was pretty overwhelming. The guy from Guatemala said, "Tell them thanks for putting stuff in Spanish."

A woman came up crying and she said, "I left my husband for another man, and somebody sent me one of the Mars Hill *Real Marriage* sermons, and I gave my life to Jesus, came home, apologized to my husband. He said that Jesus dies for sins so we don't need to kill our marriage." And they're holding hands and crying and saying, "Tell the people of Mars Hill thanks for putting the gospel out for free." And so they've reconciled their marriage.

And there's just unending stories of God giving favor and grace to people, and we're really honored and excited to be a part of what he is doing. Amen? And if you didn't come prepared to give, you can go ahead at MarsHill.com/give. Give to your church, pray for your church. We're part of the kingdom of God, and people really need our King. Amen? People really need our King.

Lord Jesus, you're a great King. You have the best kingdom. Lord Jesus, we confess, we're like Esther. We don't start ready, prepared, godly, and pure. We come guilty, confused, disqualified, and a mess. But you give us *hesed*, covenant love, and favor, and grace, and you change us, and then you allow us to be part of what you're doing to expand your kingdom. We come now to partake of Communion, to feast with our King, to sing the praises of our King, because our King is the best King, so we thank you, Lord Jesus, amen.

Note: This sermon transcript has been edited for readability.