

Text: Esther 2:1-18

Title: “Remember Who You Are”

INTRODUCTION

ILLUSTRATION – If you know anything about Super Heroes you know that some of them keep their true identity a secret ... like Peter Parker. He's Peter Parker (PHOTO) until the world needs him, then he changes his identity to Spider Man (PHOTO). It's a little different with Dr. Bruce Banner (PHOTO). He changes his identity when somebody makes him really mad, and he becomes the Hulk (PHOTO). And then there is probably my favorite, Captain America (PHOTO). He's just always Captain America. He doesn't have another identity. Now which one best describes you? Are you like Peter Parker ... you change your identity when people want you to be different? Are you like Bruce Banner ... you change when people really make you mad? Or are you like Captain America ... always just who you are.

And that's a real challenge for us as believers ... in every situation to remember that we are the people of God. Turn to Esther 2. This was a challenge for a young lady named Esther. We're studying her amazing story in the book named after her. Let's start by reading...

Esther 2:1 - Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her.

Let's review. King Xerxes was the mighty king of Persia (*Ooooo!*). He's a very powerful man, and he threw a big party and invited all the important people of the empire. At the end he decided he wanted to lustfully show off his beautiful wife Queen Vashti (*Oh no!*). Queen Vashti said, “Oh no I'm not.” This created a national crisis and Xerxes sent Vashti away. She's no longer his wife or his queen. Now it's been four or five years and historians tell us that during this period Xerxes has been off fighting against the Greeks and getting whipped. So he's lost a war and he's lost his wife ... and he needs some new excitement in his life. So...

Esther 2:2 - Then the king's personal attendants proposed, “Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king.

Esther 2:3 - Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa. Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them.

So these attractive young women from all over Persia will be brought into the Susa Spa for treatments to prepare them for one night with the king. And whichever girl pleases the king, she will become the new queen. Sounds like a TV reality show. And the king approves.

And these events are going to pull in our two main characters, Mordecai and Esther. They are going to find themselves in the middle of some circumstances that will test their character ... their resolve to be who they are supposed to be as the people of God.

Esther 2:5 - Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish,

Esther 2:6 - who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin king of Judah.

Remember, when we hear Mordecai's name we think, "*Awesome!*" That's pretty much who he is, at least in the end. The writer wants us to know without a doubt that Mordecai is a Jew. He's of the Israelite tribe of Benjamin and a descendent of Kish. When most Jews chose to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their temple as the people of God, Mordecai's family chose to stay in Persia. Over the years he and the other Jews had apparently grown comfortable in a pagan land. Here in the book of Esther you never hear them talking about God, the Law, righteousness or anything else associated with the worship of God. Mordecai is his Persian name, and it means "worshipper of Marduk," the pagan god. That's his identity.

It's easy for us to get into a situation as believers where there's really nothing about us that indicates to others that we are a child of God. We have so blended in to our work and our circle of non-believing friends that there's really nothing about us that would reveal our identity as a believer.

Well, Mordecai's adopted cousin is having the same challenge. Her name is Esther (*Yay!*). She's the leading lady of the story.

Esther 2:7 - Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

Esther 2:8 - When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem.

Esther 2:9 - The girl pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

Imagine you're a dad in one of these provinces when a commissioner comes knocking on your door telling you that your daughter has been selected (drafted) as a participant for the competition to be the next queen of Persia. She will go for a year of spa treatments before she goes in to spend a night with the king, and if she's acceptable in her looks and her performance then she has a chance of becoming the queen of Persia. What's a good little Jewish girl doing in such a competition?

Now, let's focus on Esther here for a moment. We know from the text here that both of her parents died, and Mordecai, her cousin (I misspoke last week. He is her cousin, not her uncle), adopted her. And every indication is that Mordecai loves her as his own daughter. We also know that Esther is stunningly beautiful. We learn that she has two names. Hadassah is her Jewish name and Esther is her Persian name. Esther might be derived from the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. The writer of Esther wants us to know that this is girl being pulled between her two identities ... her identity as a daughter

of the covenant people of God (the Jews) and a beautiful young lady immersed in the pagan culture of Persia. She belongs to God, but she doesn't show it in public. She belongs to God, but she has no problem eating the king's food (which conflicted with the dietary laws of the Law of Moses) and spending the night with King Xerxes.

Now, some people speculate that she may have been forced into this. It says in v.8 that she "was taken to the king's palace."

ILLUSTRATION – If so, this may have been an instance of forced sexual slavery, like what has happened in Nigeria where the radical Islamic group Boko Haram kidnapped about 200 schoolgirls and is threatening to sell them as slave prostitutes if their demands are not met. We need to pray for their return.

Others speculate that Esther managed to get through this competition without compromising morally in any way. Probably not. Most scholars I have read think that she could have put up more resistance. Remember, Vashti stood her ground and was banished rather than perform in front of the king's friends.

Perhaps the most important bit of information about Esther comes in v.10.

Esther 2:10 - Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.

Why? Mordecai seems to think the best thing for her to do is just "go along to get along." Blend in and don't make your religious identity an issue. This pressure to conform came from her own family. Some of you know about that. So there's nothing about the way Esther behaves in this situation that would reveal her true identity as a daughter of the people of God, the Jews.

And we often cave in to the same pressure. Privately you would say you believe in God, but publicly you'll never let it be known. There's not much about the way you live, the way you dress, the places you go, what you write on Facebook, what you do on a date, how you spend your money that reveal to others that you are a Christian.

So here's the moment of truth. Xerxes is having this competition among the most beautiful women of the empire. Which one will please him the most? Esther is in line ... she has her number ... she's been through all the pampering ... she will have her one night with the king. The Bible says...

Esther 2:17 - Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

She won! Esther is the new queen. The very crown that Vashti refused to model for the men is now being worn by Esther. But what has she compromised to get to that position? And the episode ends with Xerxes throwing another big party, proclaiming a national holiday and sending gifts to all the provinces (v.18). When the king's happy, everyone's happy.

I want to leave you today with two important points of application from Esther's story. Remember who you are...

1. WHEN THINGS HAPPEN BEYOND YOUR CONTROL

Someone has compared Esther to a twig being carried along by the strong current of a river. She had no control over the fact that her parents decided to not return to Jerusalem with the other people of God. She couldn't control the fact that her parents had died, leaving her an orphan. She had no control over the fact that she was a strikingly beautiful young lady that attracted the attention of important people.

And there are some things in your life that you cannot control. You have no control over the fact that your parents got a divorce, or that your spouse left you. You have no control over the fact that you lost your job, or that you were hit with a devastating illness. In all of that be faithful to God. Remember who you are.

I think of Daniel and his three friends who were forcefully carried into captivity just like Esther and her family. The king wanted to groom them for service in his court by feeding them rich foods which faithful Jews were permitted not to eat.

Daniel 1:8 - But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way.

Remember who you are when things happen to you that are beyond your control. Be faithful to God anyway. Also, remember who you are...

2. WHEN THINGS HAPPEN YOU CAN CONTROL

As believers we have control over the places we go, the movies we watch, the beverages we drink, the friends we choose, the people we date, the mate we marry, and the life we live. Listen to the counsel of Romans 12:1-2:

Romans 12:1 - Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.

Did Esther do that? Probably not. She allowed her body to be used for the king's purposes, not God's.

Romans 12:2 - Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

Did Esther do that? Not at the beginning. She caved in ... she conformed. She chose to do the will of an earthly king rather than the will of her Heavenly King. We have to be willing to risk whatever it takes to be obedient to the will of God for our life ... to not *conform* to the world, but instead be *transformed*.

So Esther probably didn't start out a godly woman. But we'll see that as the story progresses Esther becomes a woman who decides she can no longer be carried along by the currents of her culture. She has to take a stand, and she does. She risks everything to fulfill God's purpose for her life. But she didn't start off that way. Esther may have not been walking with God at this point, but God was walking with Esther.

And you may be looking at your life and thinking, "I'm a lot like Esther. I've messed up. God can never use me. I'm divorced. I made a bad career choice. I had to declare bankruptcy. I had a child out of wedlock. I got an abortion. I watched pornography." Listen, the story of the book of Esther and the story of the Bible is that God is greater than your sin. Hear that loud and clear. The grace and mercy of God is greater than your sin. And God demonstrated that at the Cross where Jesus died for you so that you can be a new person. Now we should not use this as a license to just live any way we want because we know God will forgive us. That's the wrong motivation for this. We all have times of failure and sin in our past ... all of us. But we should be growing and progressing.

The question is will you let that define you for the rest of our lives ... or by the grace of God will it refine you for the best of your life.

CONCLUSION

Listen, Esther and the other young women were willing to go through so much poking and pampering and perfuming in preparation for the service of the King Xerxes. Are you willing to endure discipline and hardship so that you can be prepared for service to King Jesus? The women of Esther's day believed King Xerxes owned their bodies. We believe that King Jesus owns our bodies, and that we are to use our bodies for His glory and purposes. Esther sacrificed so much so she could be used by King Xerxes. But King Jesus deserves even greater sacrifices for us to be used by Him. King Xerxes was preparing a harem. King Jesus is preparing His Bride, the Church, in order to ...

Ephesians 5:27 – “to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

And He did that by dying for us and living again.