

# Long Live the Queen (and King)

*Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.*

Date: 30 August 2017

Preacher: Lee Roberts

[ 0 : 00 ] You know, when we covered Esther chapter 1 last week, or two weeks ago actually, we saw King Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes, throw a six month long party.

His goal was to convince the who's who of his empire that he had a good plan for conquering Greece. At the end of the final seven day feast for those six months, the king asked Queen Vashti to come to his feast so they could show off her beauty.

And when she refused, he became furious, and his seven trusted advisors told him that he should replace her with another queen. In chapter 1 verse 19, Mimican, one of the not so magnificent seven, is speaking. And let's look at verses 19 through 22 of chapter 1 for some review.

There Mimican said, During the last lesson, we talked about how, rather than having the desired effect, this decree simply publicized the fact that Vashti had snubbed the king.

Nevertheless, the king could still enforce the provision that Vashti should be replaced as queen. Tonight, as we look at Esther chapter 2, we'll see how the king selected his new queen.

[ 2 : 10 ] And we'll also see God preserving the king's life so that the king can later protect the Jews. Although God's name is never mentioned in the entire book, we again will see overwhelming evidence of God's providence.

And if some of the exiled Jews said something similar to the phrase, long live the queen, or long live the king, they were simply following right along with God's plan.

So before we look at chapter 2 in detail, let's go ahead and read all of chapter 2. Starting with chapter 2, verse 1, it says,

We mentioned that the king displayed his riches and held the feast documented in chapter 1 because he wanted to convince the guests that he had a plan for conquering Greece that would succeed.

We have to give the king partial credit. He apparently did convince the people that he had a good plan because his empire attacked Greece. The only problem for the king and his empire was that the plan failed.

[ 7 : 20 ] Between 483 and 481 BC, Xerxes was away from Susa. The easy victory that he had hoped for really became a crushing defeat. The Greeks routed his army and demolished his navy.

And feeling sullen and dispirited, he boarded one of his remaining ships and returned to Susa. So that's the context of chapter 2. We have a defeated king coming home to lick his wounds.

And especially in those days, a sad king is rarely a good thing for the king's subjects. So chapter 2 splits nicely into five paragraphs, most of which tell us how the king's attendants tried to help the king get over his sadness.

And in verses 1 through 4, we learn about the searched provinces. So the searched provinces are the first things that we'll see. And to learn about those searched provinces, listen to verses 1 through 4 again.

They say, The opening words of chapter 2, verse 1, after these things, don't specify how much later this occurred.

[ 9 : 08 ] Bible scholars actually fast forward to verse 16 and realize that Esther did not become Xerxes' queen until the seventh year of his reign. That would have been 479 BC, or four years after the events of chapter 1.

Based on that, the king's depression must have lasted for a long time. We see at the start of the chapter that the king remembered Vashti. So this suggests that the king wanted to see her.

He had a significant problem, though. That problem was what had been decreed against her. The way it's worded, what has been decreed against her, was showing that that was not his independent decision, or at least he was trying to make it out like it wasn't his independent decision.

It may suggest that he was trying to transfer the blame for the decision to his advisors, which, of course, is a tendency among rulers if a decision doesn't work out the way they hoped. In our day, we sometimes see rulers who exhibit the same tendency. And the Jewish commentary relates that when the king was told what had happened to Vashti, or actually reminded what had happened to her, he was infuriated with his advisors, so much so that he had them banished. [10:24] Another version says that he didn't have them banished. He had them beheaded instead. Neither of these things may be true, but we still get a picture of him as being erratic, tyrannical, and emotional, and that agrees with the estimates of him made outside of the Bible by secular historians.

If the king had either banished or beheaded the seven advisors that we saw in chapter 1, the current set of advisors obviously had a self-preservation incentive to make the king happy. And verses 2 and 3 introduce us to the advisor's proposal. That's when they said that we should let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king and let the king have people search the provinces to gather all the beautiful young virgins to his harem in Susa.

So when Queen Vashti was sent away, the idea was to find someone better to fill her position. At the end of verse 119 that we read at the beginning, we see where his advisor said, let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she.

Better in chapter 1 apparently meant someone who would be more compliant, more willing to go along with what the king wanted her to do. Somewhere in the years between chapter 1 and chapter 2, the definition of better seems to have changed because in back-to-back verses starting with verse 2-2, the king's attendants say that the possible replacements for Vashti should be beautiful young virgins.

[12:01] So in their search for a replacement, it never seems to have occurred to those in charge to include a character assessment of the possible queen. They list only three virtues for the possible queen and for what this better woman would be like.

She had to be young, she had to be unmarried, and she had to be extraordinarily pretty. The whole purpose of a person's existence in Persia was to serve the empire.

That meant that no permission was needed for the empire to draft a young woman into this particular branch of the civil service. The empire didn't care whether parents had other plans for their daughter.

They just wanted the daughter to do what they wanted. We need to remember, though, that there was nothing sexist about this perspective either because the empire also would draft people's sons to serve as the king's eunuchs if the empire felt that there was a need and if the people were qualified.

Most likely, none of the contestants we see tonight would be going home afterward. The king wanted to add to his collection of living dolls, and the ones chosen would live in secluded splendor for the rest of their lives.

[13:14] The women would receive regular meals, and probably very few would have resisted the royal summons. Many would have regarded it as a wonderful opportunity to have a comfortable, if not pointless, existence.

And for many, it would probably seem like they had won the lottery. To us, that may sound like something that's very bizarre because we idolize our personal freedom so much.

But think about our culture. Think of the people around us who spend their entire working careers in jobs that they don't like or sometimes jobs that they even despise just because it gives them a comfortable salary and relative job security.

So the empire may have changed, and the kinds of demands the empire makes may have changed, but our world is not that much different than the world of King Ahasuerus.

We see that the advisor's suggestion pleased the king. He decided to do it so readily that we really can overlook the unusualness of his method for selecting a queen.

[14:20] In those days, a king would typically take a wife from one of the seven noble families of Persia. The Persian king was obligated to choose his wife from one of those families.

But this was a rule that was often broken, and the suggestion of Xerxes' servants here implied that the new queen would be a commoner. So far, the book of Esther has been focused on the king. Starting with verse 2-5, though, we get introduced to two more people who prominently figure in the events to come. So verses 5-11 tell us about the significant pair.

So let's look at the significant pair, and we'll do that by reading the verses again, starting with verses 5 and 6. It says, We see from these verses that Mordecai was a descendant of Kish from the tribe of Benjamin.

That meant he was related to King Saul. That doesn't seem like much right now, but that will become significant later in the story when we look at chapter 3 next week.

[15:50] Kish had been brought to Babylon in 597 B.C. by Nebuchadnezzar, and the family had lived in Susa ever since. The clash of cultures that exiles like Mordecai experienced is evident already in the way he's introduced.

On one hand, he's identified as a Jew, and he has a kosher genealogy that stretches back to the golden days of Israel. More than 100 years of exile had passed since the destruction of his homeland, but he had yet to be assimilated.

On the other hand, however, his name is Mordecai. That's a form of the Babylonian name Marduka, which includes within it the name of a Babylonian god called Marduk.

That's not to say that Mordecai was a worshiper of Marduk. We see throughout the Bible that many faithful exiles had both Hebrew and Babylonian names.

A text dating from the last years of Darius I, or the early years of Xerxes, mentions a Marduka who was a royal accountant on an inspection tour from Susa.

[16:58] Evidence points to Marduka and Mordecai being the same person. As we get to verse 7 now, we see the other half of this significant pair.

Verse 7 says he, Mordecai, 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.

The other member of Mordecai's household was his cousin, whom he'd taken into his care because she was an orphan. She also had dual names and a dual identity.

Her Hebrew name was Hadassah, that means myrtle. So she had a kosher heritage, and she knew that she was the daughter of Avahel. The empire, however, knew her by her Persian name, which of course is Esther, and that means star, and that could also be an allusion to the pagan goddess Ishtar.

So Esther, like all the exiles, had to live in two worlds. As her life unfolded, though, there would come a day when she would have to decide between which of these two worlds, and she would decide which one defined her.

[18:18] The writer makes a point of describing her physical appearance. Josephus, the Jewish historian, wrote, Esther surpassed all women in beauty in the entire habitable world.

That's quite a description, isn't it there? Later, rabbis said that she was one of the four most beautiful women in history, along with Sarah, Rahab, and Abigail.

Based upon the description of verse 7, along with the writings of Josephus and the rabbis outside of the Bible, verse 8 is predictable. Verse 8 says, Esther's beauty got her in the door, but we know that every woman selected by the king's advisors was beautiful.

According to Josephus, there's evidence that 400 girls were brought, showing that the competition between them must have been considerable. After she became one of the candidates, Esther's behavior is what set her apart.

Look again at verse 9. Verse 9 says, And the young woman, Esther, pleased him, Haggai, and won his favor, and he quickly provided her with 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.

[19:57] The writer tells us that Esther won favor in Haggai's sight. She worked for her promotion in the House of the Women, and she did that by fitting into the agenda that the empire had set for her.

She was willing to let the empire define her reality. Resistance wasn't high on her program at this point. She seemed content, even eager, to be assimilated.

Esther learned that life in the harem was simply life in the empire in miniature. It was a relatively pointless existence, where life was regulated in all its details, and promotion depended not on talent or character, but on pleasing those in charge.

In return for this compliance, Haggai awarded Esther with special food and an early start on her beauty treatments. He also gave her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her

and her maids into the best place in the harem.

Verse 10 shows us just how far Esther went to be compliant. It says, Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.

[ 21 : 05 ] Mordecai's instruction to Esther not to reveal her people or kindred is the first hint of anti-Semitism that will surface in chapter 3.

A possible explanation for why Mordecai told Esther to keep her heritage a secret may be related to the fact that many of the Jews who remained in Persia had become very wealthy, and their wealth had given rise to envy and jealousy among the natives.

Verse 11 closes this section by telling us about how Mordecai followed what was happening to Esther. And every day, Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

We may wonder how Esther could have hidden her nationality if she had daily communication with Mordecai, who might have already been known as a Jew. But in a country so diversified as Persia, such interaction would have been common.

So we've talked about the search provinces and the significant pair. In verses 12 through 14, we see the selection process. So the selection process.

[ 22 : 21 ] And that selection process really is a Miss Persia beauty pageant. Listen to verses 12 through 14 again. It says, Now when the turn came for each young woman to go into King Ahasuerus after being 12 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, when the young woman went into the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace.

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

The year-long preparation for each young woman involved having ointments massaged into their skin to remove unwanted body hair and oil of myrrh to cover any trace of body odor.

Then one by one, as the young virgins who had competed in the pageant and had completed their beautification process went in, they went to spend the night with King Xerxes, and they were told that they could take anything with them and whatever jewelry and clothing they desired.

In the evening they would be shown to the king's private quarters, and in the morning they would be taken to the king's harem. And as we saw, they wouldn't go into the king again unless he summoned them by name.

[ 23 : 53 ] There was no guarantee that the king would call them again. Many were confined to virtual widowhood. So again here we see how one person, the king, could use so many other human beings just to satisfy his personal desires.

His abuse of power is evident in the demise of so many innocent women for his physical pleasure.

And even today, those who have no fear of God sometimes can satisfy their desires without limit.

Verses 15 through 18 have the next section of the chapter. In these verses, the king finally meets the stunning person. So the stunning person is who the king sees next.

And of course, that stunning person is Esther. Verses 15 through 18 tell us what happens when the king met Esther. When the turn came for Esther, the daughter of Abahel, the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter to go into the king, she asked for nothing except what Haggai, the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised.

Now Esther was winning favor 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 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.

[ 25 : 29 ] 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.

The month of Tebeth is in the middle of winter. It covers parts of our December and January. That means it was cold and wet. The writer's mention of the month and year indicates that the search for the queen had taken quite a long time.

The night when Esther was shown into the king's private chambers, she didn't adorn herself with costly clothing or expensive jewelry. She contented herself with those things that Haggai suggested.

In this, we see a glimpse of her inner security. She didn't feel the need to surround herself with things to enhance her sense of worth. The meeting seems to have been a case of love at first sight. The king more than liked Esther. He fell in love with her. The Hebrew word for love there implies a significant emotional bond. He loved Esther more than all the women.

[ 26 : 37 ] She found grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins. In fact, the king was so attracted to Esther that he stopped the contest. She possessed all of the qualities that he was looking for in a queen.

And so he just set the royal crown on her head and ended the contest there. This sudden decision on the part of the king to stop the contest reveals the extent to which Esther had impressed him. Ahasuerus made Esther queen in Vashti's place and that's a substitution that's underlined by the reference to the royal crown. Of course, that's the same crown that Vashti refused to appear in. And it also says the king gave a feast in her honor. Everybody had a holiday and everyone was encouraged to share in the king's joy. Are you also getting a picture that the king liked to eat? It seems like anytime something significant happens, he has a feast to go with it. If he wasn't a pagan, you might have thought he was Baptist. But we know from his behavior that he was definitely a pagan.

[ 27 : 40 ] Verse 18 tells us also that the king gave money to the provinces. He gave many gifts as well. And that shows how happy the king was. To this point, we've seen the king thinking only about himself, but now he was so happy with his new queen, he was willing to give money away and to forgive taxes.

We have one more section left in the chapter. We've seen the search provinces, the significant pair, the selection process, and the stunning person. In the last verses, we see the snubbed protector. The snubbed protector is the final thing. And that snubbed protector is a protector of the king. Here are verses 19 through 23 again.

Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. Esther had not made known her kindred or her people as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him.

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

[ 28 : 52 ] And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai 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 and it was recorded in the book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king.

The meaning of the first phrase of verse 19 is uncertain. It possibly refers to a second gathering of all the virgins who never had a chance to appear before the king after he stopped the contest.

And they might have had a ceremonial parade to complete the celebration of Esther's coronation. Some suggest that the remaining virgins were brought together so that the king could show just how much more beautiful Esther was than they were.

So in that sense, it was almost like a reverse beauty pageant if that were the case. The second phrase of verse 19 is significant though. It says Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate.

Sitting at the king's gate suggests that Mordecai held some government office or status. The phrase implies a position of privilege or responsibility. Persian officials had to stay at the gate of the royal palace.

[ 30 : 04 ] And throughout the ancient Near East, the gate was the area where trials were conducted and where justice was dispensed. This function continued after the exile period and those making a formal complaint stood during the proceedings and the judge, who might be the king or one of his appointees, sat.

We talked earlier about how a text outside of the Bible refers to Mordecai as a royal accountant. Perhaps after Esther's rise to prominence, Esther used her influence to get Mordecai promoted to a judicial role.

This might have been in recognition of what Mordecai had done for Esther and it would, of course, make communication with him a lot easier. Verse 20 tells us that even after she became queen,

Esther kept her ancestry secret.

Esther knew her place, perhaps because Mordecai's command fitted perfectly with her natural temperament to want to blend in. For now, verses 21 through 23 almost seemed like a footnote. The episode summarized here will become particularly significant, though, when we get to chapter 6. Two of the king's eunuchs conspired to kill him.

[ 31 : 22 ] Mordecai became aware of their plot while he was sitting at the king's gate. He passed this information to Esther, who herself was careful to give credit to Mordecai. This was a pretty shrewd move on her part because both of their positions were made a little more secure by putting the king in their debt.

Rather than being hanged by the neck on a modern type of gallows, though, the men probably were impaled on a stake or a post. This was a typical method of execution in the Persian Empire. In fact, Darius, Xerxes' father, was known to have once impaled 3,000 men. A record of the assassination attempt of King Xerxes was written in the annals, which is the official royal record. Saving the king's life should have resulted in recognition for Mordecai right then. In general, the Persian kings were extremely diligent and generous in rewarding those who had served well. They kept careful lists of those who had done them a favor so that no good deed from the empire's perspective might go unrewarded. Strangely, though, this particular good deed did go unrewarded at the time.

[ 32 : 32 ] Mordecai probably spent weeks and months waiting in vain for some token of appreciation, and that's why we can refer to him at least at this point as the snubbed protector.

In the introduction, we talked about how we would see overwhelming evidence of God's providence throughout this chapter. Let's just think about what some of that evidence is.

We see God's providence first in the selection of Esther as queen. None of the events related to her selection was within her power. She couldn't have suggested how the king would go about finding a new queen.

She had nothing to do with the development of her natural beauty. She couldn't have ensured that she was even chosen as a candidate for queen. She could not have been sure of gaining favor with Haggai, the king's representative.

She couldn't have expected preferential treatment. She certainly could have not made the king choose her. But God could influence, control, and direct all of these things, and he obviously did.

[ 33 : 37 ] However, none of those concerned, with perhaps maybe the exception of Mordecai and Esther, recognized the unseen hand of God in what was happening. As we continue through the book of Esther, we'll see that the king initially failing to recognize Mordecai for saving the king's life also is an example of God's providence.

Unlike God, who's never negligent in rewarding his faithful servants, the Persians sometimes failed to reward their faithful service, despite how much they wanted to do so. That uncommon forgetfulness on the part of the king was absolutely necessary in God's plans.

Timing is everything in the work of providence, and even though God's hand is still invisible, God is nonetheless at work accomplishing his own ends.

We also see God's providence concerning how he worked even the people's disobedience for his purposes. Esther was in Susa because of the sin and disobedience of her ancestors.

Disobedience brought the family of Mordecai and Esther into exile at the time of Jehoiachin. The destruction of Jerusalem was the culmination of the judgment of God upon his own people who had abandoned him.

[ 34 : 53 ] Disobedience brought God's people into exile in the first place. Disobedience also kept Mordecai and Esther's family in exile. In 538 B.C., Cyrus issued a decree permitting the Jews to return home.

Some went back with Zerubbabel at that time, but many stayed because they were comfortably settled where they were, outside the land of promise. Obviously, compared to a backwater like Jerusalem had turned into, Susa seemed like a much better place to make progress and advance in the service of the empire as Mordecai himself discovered.

There's only one possible thing wrong with that, or one main thing wrong with that. Those who play the empire's game are likely sooner or later to find themselves playing by the empire's rules. Had Mordecai and Esther or their parents returned to Jerusalem at some point in the previous 50 years, Esther certainly wouldn't have been such an easy target for the king's beauty pageant.

The result of the family's history of disobedient compromise was that Mordecai and especially Esther found themselves in a position that for all its worldly advantages was potentially disastrous spiritually.

Just think about what happened to her. She ended up married to an uncircumcised pagan and virtually cut off from the community of faith. She was successfully pretending not to be a child of the true and living God.

[ 36 : 20 ] And her enviable progress in one world, the world of the empire of the king, came at the cost of completely suppressing her identity as a citizen of the kingdom of God.

Obviously, we know that the Jews would not have approved of Esther participating in some sort of pageant like what she did with the king. Yet we also see God's ability to turn disobedience and the fruits of parents' sins and even our sins to his own glory and his people's good.

Ahasuerus and his cronies meant their edict purely for the satisfaction of the king's selfish pleasures. Mordecai and Esther found themselves impaled on the horns of a dilemma, though, because of their earlier compromises with the empire.

Yet God's hand hovers over every detail, moving the pieces into place as he's determined, even though sin and compromise was what he used in order to achieve his own good purposes.

So here's hope for all of us who find ourselves in difficult circumstances in the present because of our past sin and compromise. perhaps God has brought us to where we are today so that we can serve him in a unique way.

[ 37 : 34 ] If so, that doesn't make those wrong decisions and sinful actions right, but we should give thanks to God that he's able to form beautiful pictures out of our smudged and stained efforts.

Past failures don't exclude us from a significant part in God's plan for the future. Chapter 2 does more than illustrate God's providence. The chapter invites us to compare and contrast a worldly kingdom with our God's kingdom.

The selection process for Esther, however refined and perfumed, was really a sordid meat market. The women were treated as objects and they were valued for their looks rather than their godliness. The scripture speaks of another choosing that's much different. That's the gracious choice God makes of a people for himself and God's people are chosen not because of their beauty, wealth, or interest.

Like Esther, we were commoners when our king chose us. Our exalted position in Christ seems too much to comprehend, but the scriptures clearly state that as sons and daughters of God, we will reign with Christ.

[ 38 : 44 ] Esther is an earthly illustration of what awaits us. 2 Timothy 2, 11, and 12a remind us of a promise. Listen to what Paul wrote there.

He said, the saying is trustworthy for if we have died with him, we will also live with him. If we endure, we will also reign with him. with him.