

ESTHER STUDY 2

Hadassah the Star

“A king’s wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it.”¹ We begin Chapter Two with a despondent, lonely Xerxes who is “remembering” Vashti. The Hebrew word for remember infers a note of compassion. Now that Xerxes has had time to

reflect on his failed marriage (and a failed campaign in Greece since the edict), he may have wished he hadn’t been so hasty to take the counsel of his advisors. His personal attendants took his distress to heart and scrambled to alleviate it, knowing that he needed a queen to ensure some level of stability for the rest of the Persian court. As we find out, God had just the woman for the job.

The first time we hear about Esther, she is described as an orphan, “Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had no father or mother.”² She seems to have had every excuse to play the victim: Hadassah, soon to be known as Esther, was an orphan, presumably being raised by an older, single male relative. She didn’t have an older woman in her life to guide and mentor her in what it means to be a woman of God (at least, if she did, she’s never mentioned or referred to). Perhaps we could understand if she didn’t know how to present herself or maybe we would excuse depression and bad habits with a statement like this: “You can’t blame the poor girl, with a childhood like that...” Without a doubt, many women in our culture are in similar situations, coming from broken homes, having emotionally absent fathers or mothers; however, our protagonist, Esther, dealt with much more than a broken home.

Not only was Esther an orphan, but it is fair to assume that she was forced to participate in the “contest” suggested by Xerxes’ attendants. Beth Moore paints a vivid picture of the process: “The large numbers [of girls] were herded like coddled cattle to the stalls of Susa, no questions asked. They were taken captive as surely as the exiles of Judah years earlier, even if some were foolish enough to be happy about it.”³ You may be wondering, “What’s the big deal? A giant beauty contest, where you get pampered 24-7, and life in the lap of luxury, and a chance to be queen? It couldn’t have been that bad...”⁴ Until you read verse 14: “In the evening [each girl] would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king’s eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless he delighted in her and she was summoned by name.”⁵ Not only did many of the girls feel used and rejected, but they faced a life of “perpetual widowhood” as a concubine, unable to ever enjoy the kindness of a faithful husband or the chance to raise a normal family.

In the midst of these dark circumstances, we are introduced to Esther, which literally means “star” in Persian. She truly shone brightly in the dark, worldly competition of Xerxes’ harem. Our author makes it very clear

Pre-Article Questions:

1. How do you think Esther felt when she was taken to the palace? How would you have felt?
2. What would have been some of the challenges of living in this time period?

1. Prov. 16:14. The Holy Bible, New International Version. Zondervan: Grand Rapids, MI. 1996.

2. Esther 2:7. The Holy Bible, New International Version.

3. Moore, Beth. Esther: It’s Tough Being A Woman. LifeWay Press: Nashville, TN. 2008. p. 41.

4. Esther 2:14. The Holy Bible, New International Version.

5. Breneman, Marvin. The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther. Vol. 10. Ed. E. Ray Clendenen. B&H Publishing Group: Nashville: TN. 1993. p. 314., Moore, 40

that Esther distinguished herself. While it was customary for the king to choose a bride from the seven leading families of Persia, this unconventional contest shows God's providence in placing Esther right where she needed to be to have an enormous sphere of influence.

The amazing and overwhelming response to Esther upon her arrival at the harem was favor. Again and again, the author drives home she won everyone's favor. In fact, he describes her as pleasing, she won favor, or someone was attracted to her at least six times in eight verses.⁶ Esther sought favor through her actions, her countenance, and her gracious manner. It is obvious that Hegai, a eunuch with nothing to gain personally from Esther's advancement, saw something special in her that particularly qualified her to be the king's consort. Moreover, he was so certain of her potential, he did everything in his power to give her an advantage, to the point of giving her advice on what she ought to take with her for her night with Xerxes.

One thing Hegai might have identified in Esther was her humility. While it is not directly addressed in Chapter Two, we see in Esther's interactions with Mordecai her humble and obedient spirit. While Esther could have made a case excusing a lack of grace, poor manners, a downcast countenance, or even deep depression, she chose instead to actively pursue favor, to seek wisdom, and to remain humble; all of these choices God honored by lifting her up.

Esther 2, NIV

1 Later when King Xerxes' fury had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. 2 Then the king's personal attendants proposed, "Let a search be made for beautiful young virgins for the king. 3 Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring all these beautiful young women 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. 4 Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. 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, 6 who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, among those taken captive with Jehoiachin[a] king of Judah. 7 Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This young woman, who was also known as Esther, had a lovely figure and was beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

8 When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women 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. 9 She pleased him and won his favor. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem. 10 Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. 11 Every day he walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. 12 Before a young woman's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. 13 And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given her to take with her from the harem to the

6. Esther 2:9-17. The Holy Bible, New International Version.

king's palace. 14 In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name. 15 When the turn came for Esther (the young woman Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favor of everyone who saw her. 16 She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

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. 18 And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality. 19 When the virgins were assembled a second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. 20 But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up. 21 During the time Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, became angry and conspired to assassinate King Xerxes. 22 But Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther, who in turn reported it to the king, giving credit to Mordecai. 23 And when the report was investigated and found to be true, the two officials were impaled on poles. All this was recorded in the book of the annals in the presence of the king.

Prayer

Dear Father God, thank You for this incredible picture of Your ability to turn even the darkest of situations into good things for Your children and glory for Yourself. Forgive me when I have chosen to wallow in my own misery and discontent rather than trusting you. Please help me to remember that all Your ways are good, You know the end from the beginning, and You are faithful to work all things together for good for those who love You and are called according to Your purpose. Lord, we want to offer You our lives. We ask You to mold our character and our personalities in such a way that we might reflect Christ and grow in favor. Place us in those positions where You may use us for your kingdom purposes. Forgive us when we have sought our own glory and gain and help us to truly seek Your kingdom and Your righteousness. We love You and thank you for the opportunity to see the miracles that spring from Your sovereign plan. Amen.

Scripture Questions:

1. List the four steps from verses 2-5 that the attendants proposed for selecting a new queen (in almost all translations the steps are introduced with the word "Let...")
2. The passage's first description of Esther defines her as an orphan, adopted by her cousin. How would you describe their relationship, based on the information given?
3. The author says that Esther pleased Hegai and won his favor; that she won the favor of everyone who saw her, and, most importantly, that she won the approval of the king. What qualities might have led to this widespread approval? Can you find evidence of these qualities in the passage?
4. List the reasons given in the text that our society would consider "valid" for labeling Esther as a victim. Do you think she took on that label? Why or why not?

Application Questions:

1. "True holiness and virtue command permanent respect and affection, far more than charm and beauty of face and form." - John MacArthur. Think about this quote as you read Proverbs 31:30 again. What do you value most highly in your life, your character and your virtue, or your outward appearance and the way people perceive you?
2. Winning favor is an active process. While this phrase is used passively (favor is given or bestowed) elsewhere in the Bible, in chapter two of Esther, the Hebrew word used describes an active seeking. How does winning the favor of your professors, peers, and future co-workers bring God glory?
3. Has there ever been a time in your life when you have been bogged down by your circumstances and found yourself blaming others rather than seeking favor?
4. Take a moment to reflect on the circumstances you are currently facing. Has God placed you in these situations for a specific purpose? Are you choosing to be gracious and seeking to grow in wisdom and humility in the midst of them?

Prayer Partner Assignment:

This week you will be meeting with a girl from your small group to memorize scripture, re-read the text for this week, and discuss what God is speaking to you through the Chapter. Please use this time to pursue the Lord together and deepen your relationship as sisters.

1. Memory Verse: Proverbs 11:2
2. Please re-read Esther Chapter Two