

Finding Providence in Unlikely Places

Esther 2:1-18

You may have missed this in the news but there was a tremendous upset this past year at Zimbabwe's 4th annual "Mister Ugly" contest. The opposite of a beauty contest, the Mister Ugly pageant is a contest to see which guy will have the honor of being named the ugliest guy in Zimbabwe. The reigning champion of ugly, William Masvinu, who had held the title since 2012, lost to 42 year old Mison Sere. Sere won due to his numerous missing front teeth and the wide range of grotesque facial expressions he could make.

Outgoing Mister Ugly Masvinu protested that the new champ Sere was too handsome to win and that his ugliness wasn't natural since it was based on missing teeth. Masvinu explained, "I am naturally ugly. He is ugly only when he opens his mouth." However one of the judges observed that Sere made a tremendous effort to enhance his ugliness, Masvinu thought he could simply coast on his natural ugliness and still become Mister Ugly.

Esther chapter 2 describes a national beauty contest, a search to find the single most beautiful girl in the Persian empire. King Ahasuerus had deposed Queen Vashti and banished her from his presence forever out of anger for her refusing to come and be gawked at by the king's drunken friends, and now, a few years later, he remembers his queen and what he decreed, and a deep sense of regret and sadness comes over him. But in Persia a king's decree is law and can never be revoked or repealed, the bridges between Ahasuerus and his queen have been burned forever and can never be repaired.

His advisors see this sadness in him and suggest that he hold a beauty contest to find the most beautiful woman in the Persian empire to be his next queen. On the face of it it is a beauty contest, but underneath the surface there is a lot that is ugly about this beauty contest. Officers in every province went out and took every young, pretty, unmarried girl away from their families, away from any life they had hoped to live, away from any person they may have cared for and hoped to marry, and conscripted them to perform in a beauty contest where they had to spend one night with the king, knowing that only one of them could win, and that all the rest would be condemned to a life in the king's harem where they could never marry anyone else, and very likely would never see the king again unless he remembered them and called for them specifically. This contest may have been to assess the beauty of these girls, but it also revealed the ugliness of Ahasuerus and his advisors.

In verse 5 we're introduced to Mordecai and his younger cousin Esther. Mordecai is a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, the tribe that King Saul was from. Knowing that will become important later. Mordecai's family had been taken into captivity generations ago so he had never known anything other than captivity in Persia. Mordecai was bringing up his younger and very beautiful cousin Esther as if she was his own daughter since her parents had died. And Esther was among those conscripted for the king's beauty contest.

Last week I mentioned that while God is never mentioned once in the book of Esther, the theme of this book is the providence of God working through flawed people and this morning we're going to take an honest look at Esther, but before we do, I want to point out that God not only works through flawed people, He also works through what can at least appear from our perspective to be flawed

circumstances. God's fingerprints are all over the events recorded in this book, but some of those events and circumstances are really flawed and messy. Let's take a minute to consider the flawed circumstances that are at work in Esther's life.

1. God's providence works through flawed circumstances

Esther's circumstances were less than ideal. Not only has she grown up a foreigner in a strange land, but at a young age she lost both of her parents. She is doubly uprooted: she is an exile far from her homeland and she is parentless. God provided for her in the person of her cousin who took her in as his own daughter, but the trauma of losing one parent, let alone both parents at once is a terribly hard blow for any child to endure.

God blessed Esther with great beauty, but that blessing became a liability when she was forced to enter the king's beauty contest, forever disrupting the life she knew. God's providence in Esther's life didn't mean that her circumstances were always easy or good.

It's easy for us to identify God's providence when things go amazing. That job falls into your lap. You're in the right place at the right time. The doctor can't find the lump that was on your lung. The bill was due on Friday and Thursday there's a check for the full amount in the mail. Those things really do happen, God does work in amazing ways like that sometimes and when He does it's easy to see His providential hand in those moments.

But the book of Esther reminds us that providence doesn't always come so neatly packaged. Years ago there was a popular Christian movie called Facing the Giants. I like the movie, it's enjoyable, but it is guilty of presenting God's providence as making all problems work out flawlessly in the end. As the movie opens:

- The main character, Grant Taylor, has a car that is falling apart
- He's not making enough money to make ends meet
- The football team he is coaching is doing so bad a group of dads are conspiring to replace him as head coach.
- He and his wife are struggling with infertility and the problem seems to be with him

With the stress of all these things pressing on him, Grant finally comes to the end of himself and yields his life completely to the Lord. On his knees he tells God that whatever He wants to do, He can do. He wants to live for the glory of the Lord. That is a beautiful place to come to, and it is a place God wants to bring all of us to total yieldedness to Jesus. But immediately after turning his life over to the Lord, here's what happens to Grant:

- Someone anonymously gives him a brand new Ford F-130 to replace his broken down car.
- He gets a 25% raise out of the blue
- His football team start winning games, culminating in the championship game which comes down to the closing 2 seconds, Grant's team is down by two points, and his starting kicker is out with an injury. So he needs to ask his second string kicker to kick a 51 yard field goal *against the wind!* But just before the kicker could attempt the kick, the opposing team's coach makes a strategic mistake and calls a time out. And during that 30 second time out the wind happens to switch

direction so that now the wind is at the kicker's back and the kick goes up and through and it's good! Grant's team wins 24-23. Grant's team is the national champs and life is good!

- But the best news is waiting for him at home as his wife tells him he has just made the "daddy team". They are going to have a baby!

God's providence in Facing the Giants is as subtle as a Mack truck. It slams you in the face with one amazing reversal after another. I wish that were how it always worked, but it isn't and the movie can send the message that problems are the result of not being yielded to the Lord and if we truly yield our lives to the Lord all those problems will be resolved. Someone recently commented to me that God's sovereignty is complicated, and I think we can see that complicated sovereignty in the Bible and specifically in the book of Esther. God is working in Esther's life and He will work through her, but the hardships and disappointments she faces don't ever completely go away. Her parents don't show up in the end having only been shipwrecked on a deserted island and presumed dead. They really are dead and she really will grow up never knowing them or having them in her life. She is taken by the king's command to be one of his harem and she will never know the other life she expected to live: growing up, meeting a guy, getting married, having children, all the normal things a young girl dreams of doing.

God's providence took her down some rough roads, and His providence may, at times take our lives down some rough roads. But He is working out His bigger good purposes in her life, and He is working out His bigger good purposes in our life. For the Christian, our lives belong to God. Jesus is the Lord of our lives. And if he ordains us to walk through the fiery furnace of trials and hardships and disappointments we can know that it's not for our ultimate harm, but for our ultimate good and for God's glory. God really does want to bring us to the place where we bend our knee to the Lordship of Jesus Christ and want to live for His glory and His glory alone, no matter what that may look like.

2. God's providence works through flawed people

The central person in this book is, of course, Esther, and God uses her in an amazing, history-changing, nation-shaking way. But Esther is a flawed heroine at best. You've probably heard the saying "dare to be a Daniel!" but I'd caution you to think twice before telling your daughter to "dare to be an Esther". Listen, God really does use her in a great way and she plays a vitally important role in the preservation of God's people, but Esther has issues and I think that a part of what God teaches us is found, not by covering up her issues but by being honest about them. God's providence works through flawed people!

Through no fault of her own Esther gets caught up in the king's empire-wide beauty contest, but how she responds to the king's decree brings up some uncomfortable questions. When she's brought into the palace and placed under the coaching of Hegai, rather than resisting or even half-heartedly complying with what's asked of her, the language in verse 9 indicates that she didn't just find favor with Hegai, she worked to win his favor. She might have been taken unwillingly (we don't know for sure) but having been conscripted to audition for becoming the king's queen, she threw her heart into it.

And we need to be honest about what's going on here. I've been using the term "beauty contest" to describe the king's edict, but the ugly truth was that every young woman who was taken into the palace was required to sleep with the king though not married to him. That's the morally ugly side to this beauty contest; to take the king's mind off of Vashti, his aides came up with a solution that was demeaning and cruel to these young women. Remember, all but one of these women would be condemned to live out

the rest of their lives in the king's harem probably never seeing the king again but never able to marry anyone else.

This is the beauty contest that Esther was working hard to win. Someone might object that she had no choice, it was obey or be put to death. That may or may not be true (we really don't know) but when we look at the example of earlier exiles such as Daniel, Shadrach, Mishach, and Abednego, they all would rather die than compromise their faith and obedience to their God. Esther could have taken the stand that she needed to obey God rather than men and left the consequences in the hands of the God of Israel.

But when her turn to go into the king comes, not only does she not take a stand against it, she seeks Hegai's best advice about what she should take with her and how she should present herself to the king to be in the best position to win the king's approval.

In fact, far from taking a stand for the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, out of obedience to her cousin Mordecai, Esther hides the very fact that she is Jewish. For five long years she will hide her nationality from everyone including the king. Contrast that to Daniel's refusal to stop praying to his God or deny his loyalty to the God of his fathers even when threatened with being thrown into a lion's den.

This book is the story of flawed circumstances and flawed people. But God's hand is all over the events unfolding and Esther does indeed win the king's favor over all the other young girls and so four years after Queen Vashti was deposed there is a new queen sitting on the throne, and it was a sweet, compliant, spiritually drifting girl named Esther. She probably sought the position out of her own personal, selfish motives, but God had great plans for her life as we will see as we read on.

Application:

What does God want to teach us through Esther's story? Here's what we don't want to walk away with: I can deliberately disobey God and it's ok. Esther is a flawed heroine who makes some questionable choices, but before we're too hard on her, we need to understand her a little better. These were spiritually dark times for the Jewish people. They had been living in exile for over a hundred years and Esther and Mordecai had grown up in exile in a foreign land - it's all they ever knew. Like most of Israel at this point I think that Esther (and Mordecai's) faith and grounding in the Bible were very weak; I don't think they knew the God of their people well at all. They weren't spiritual giants - they were survivors! As events unfold God will forge them into the kind of man and woman He can do mighty things through and He will use crisis to do that, but right now they don't know God or His word very well at all. They were living with what light they had, and we get the impression they don't have much light.

That's why it would be foolish to take their story and think that it teaches us that we can deliberately disobey God and everything will work out ok. We have much more light than they had and if we sin against the light we have, we are putting ourselves in a dangerous place, full of regret and heartache. That's not the lesson God has for us in Esther. But a lesson God does have for us is that even with our flaws and failures and faults God can use us for His plans and His glory. The beauty of Esther isn't that she's got it all together, her beauty is that she is a hot mess making all kinds of bad choices, but God somehow works through those bad choices to put her in the right place at the right time. In His providence God weaves the loss and the bad and the misfortunes and the anger and lust of selfish men

and kings and the bad choices of Esther and Mordecai into just the right combination to do a great work of deliverance for Israel from the Satanic hatred of an evil man with almost unlimited power to commit genocide against the Jews across the empire.

What I love about the honest and gritty story of Esther is that it reminds us that God uses us flaws and all. The story of redemption isn't neat and sterile, it's messy and awkward and surprising, but through it all, in ways we can't fully understand, God weaves His work of saving grace into the mess that is the human story. He works through even those circumstances that we wish with all our hearts were otherwise. Regrets, loss, disappointments, heartache, past mistakes, even our sin, none of this is more powerful than God's providence and none of it is beyond God's ability to redeem for our good and His glory. The book of Esther isn't meant to magnify how great Esther is, it's meant to magnify how great God is. The gospel of Jesus Christ isn't meant to testify how great and all together we are, but how great and merciful and gracious God is to love us and save us and use us for His purposes, not because we don't have flaws but in spite of our flaws. And it gives us hope that God can bring great good out of hard and badly flawed circumstances.

Has some disappointment or tragedy or past mistake sidelined you? Caused you to think that God can't or won't use you? That He can't or won't do good to you? That somehow you missed the "spiritual giant able to do great things for God" boat? Here's the challenge I believe God's word has for us: dare to be an Esther! Dare to be a woman or man who trusts God to use our lives, imperfect as they are, as messy as they are, as many mistakes as we may have made, with whatever misfortunes we have endured, with whatever we wish had been different in our lives, but to trust God to use those things in our lives for His purposes and for the good of others. God's purposes for your life, and mine, is bigger than simply blessing us. He wants to use us to bless others, to make a difference in the lives of others in an eternal way.

Jesus is our hope and our Redeemer. As we trust him, as we follow him, he lives in us and empowers us to accomplish what he's calling us to do. And he gets the glory, not us.