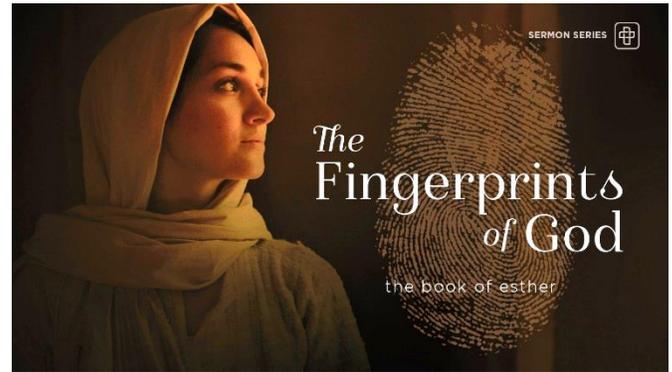


## We Are Exiles In This World

David Sunday

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This morning's Scripture passage is Esther 1:1 to 2:18. You might want to turn there, but I would also encourage you, if you want, to feel free to just listen this story. Allow your heart to engage with the story, to feel the emotion the story is leading you into. This is God's Word to us, His people. In Esther 1, the Holy Spirit says:

*<sup>1</sup> Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, <sup>2</sup> in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, <sup>3</sup> in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, <sup>4</sup> while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days.*

*<sup>5</sup> And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace.*

*<sup>6</sup> There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl, and precious stones. <sup>7</sup> Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. <sup>8</sup> And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired.*

*<sup>9</sup> Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.*

*<sup>10</sup> On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, <sup>11</sup> to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. <sup>12</sup> But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.*

<sup>13</sup> Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, <sup>14</sup> the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): <sup>15</sup> "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?"

<sup>16</sup> Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. <sup>17</sup> For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.'

<sup>18</sup> This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.

<sup>19</sup> If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. <sup>20</sup> So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike."<sup>21</sup> This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. <sup>22</sup> He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

<sup>2:1</sup> After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. <sup>2</sup> Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. <sup>3</sup> 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, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. <sup>4</sup> And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

<sup>5</sup> Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite,

<sup>6</sup> who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. <sup>7</sup> He 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.

<sup>8</sup> So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. <sup>9</sup> And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her 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. <sup>10</sup> Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. <sup>11</sup> And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

<sup>12</sup> 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— <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> In the evening she 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 the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

<sup>15</sup> When the turn came for Esther 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 in the eyes of all who saw her. <sup>16</sup> 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, <sup>17</sup> 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. <sup>18</sup> 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.

This is the Word of our God.

I think every pastor on the week after his ordination should have to read a Scripture reading with a whole bunch of Persian names in it. Well done, Brandon.

Some of you probably remember experiencing God's presence at a youth retreat or a camp when you were growing up. I'm so glad that our youth group meets every Wednesday night to hear the Word of God and can experience God in that way. Sometimes they do special events like the winter camp or the mission trip to Ukraine next summer.

I had an experience when I was a teenager where God really impressed something on my heart. It was a fall retreat in Green Lake, Wisconsin, and I'm thinking it was October of 1986, because I had just met Kate a couple months earlier and she was there with me. That means it was 33 years ago, when I was 16 years old. The theme of the retreat was "No compromise," based on the song by Keith Green:

Make my life a prayer to You  
I wanna do what You want me to  
No empty words and no white lies  
No token prayers, no compromise

I wanna shine the light you gave  
Through Your Son You sent to save us  
From ourselves and our despair  
It comforts me to know You're really there

To this day, when I listen to that song, I feel a surge of emotions welling up. That weekend, I committed to God that I would live my life for Jesus with no compromise, no regrets. But back then, I had no idea how challenging a life of no compromise would be. When I sang that song and the line "It comforts me to know You're really there," I thought I would always feel God's presence with me as strongly as I felt Him that beautiful fall weekend in Green Lake. I had certainly not come to terms with how vicious an enemy I had in my flesh. I didn't have a clue how seductive the allure of this world would be.

I got my first car in 1979—a Volkswagen Rabbit with a sunroof that opened up. I thought it was so cool. I was making about \$25 a week teaching piano lessons and gas was only about \$1.05 a gallon, so I had enough to put gas in my car and go to Burger King a couple times a week. I thought I had it made in this world. Then I grew up and learned how challenging and costly it is to live a life of no compromise.

In this world, we are a religious minority. Our identity is to be followers of Jesus in a world that does not share our values—in fact, a world that is increasingly hostile to what we believe and

how we believe God is calling us to live. In the words of the Apostle Peter, we are “an elect exile.” We are aliens, strangers in this world, which is what makes the book of Esther so relevant to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This book understands what it’s like for God’s people to live in a dominant culture that is hostile to people who want to live an uncompromising life for Jesus.

The story of Esther isn’t here to make our life in this world seem simpler or easier. It’s here to remind us that in the past God’s people have been where we are. We’re not the first people to live in a culture that is growing increasingly hostile to our faith. We’re not the first people who compromised along the way. God is not finished with us. This book is here to help us come out of hiding, embrace our identity as God’s elect exiles and learn to obey what the Holy Spirit exhorts us to do through the Apostle Peter. Look at 1 Peter 2:11-12 (NIV):

*Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.*

How do we do that? How do we live faithfully as God’s elect exiles who are strangers in this world? It will take three core convictions. We have to have these convictions in the depths of our being.

### **1. What appears impressive in the empire of this world is really a façade.**

First, what appears to be impressive in the empire of this world—this world’s system—is really a façade. You’ve got to believe that as a core conviction.

This story is set in the year 483 B.C. We know from biblical and secular history that the Persian Empire was the superpower of the world at this time. The king’s name in Greek is Xerxes. In Hebrew, it’s Ahasuerus, which sounds a lot like the word for headache. So, judging from how much he had to drink in chapter one, headaches were probably a common experience for this king—and he’s going to prove to be a great headache to the Jewish people who are living in exile under his rule. So, “King Headache.”

He reigned from 486 to 465 B.C., and the story opens in the third year of his reign, 483 B.C. So to juxtapose this in biblical history, his grandfather was Cyrus, the king who issued the decree in 539 B.C. that allowed some of the Jews to return from exile in Persia back to their homeland in Jerusalem. That was 55 years before the opening of this book. Ahasuerus’ father was Darius I, and it was under Darius’ reign that the Jews rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. That was finished around 515 B.C., about 30 years earlier, so a generation before Ahasuerus. Then a generation after him, in 445 B.C., is when Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to help rebuild the walls.

So a lot of events in biblical history are happening around here, during the period of time that's called postexilic—after the exile. But actually, many Jews were comfortable remaining right where they were in Persia. They had settled there, built houses, planted vineyards, gotten jobs and blended with the culture. They felt fairly at home there. To be fair to them, they might have reasoned that even though they were allowed to go back to Jerusalem, it was still under Persian rule, so why not just stay put where they were?

Notice in verse one how expansive the reign of King Ahasuerus was. We're talking from northwest India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Iran, Iraq, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, northern Greece, Egypt, Libya, Eritrea and northern Sudan. I mean, that is a huge realm. You couldn't get on a plane and fly to Britain if you wanted to get out of the Persian Empire. If you even had money, you might be able to get a horse, but that was unlikely. There was little chance that anyone could escape, because you had to walk on foot. So the reign of this king was just pervasive and inescapable.

And that's the way the empire of this world is. We can't escape it. We can't run away and hide. We can't isolate ourselves and pretend we don't live in this world. We're supposed to live in this world, but not of this world. All of us are living in this culture, breathing in its influence. We can't escape. The truth is, there's a lot we like about our culture. There's a lot we don't want to escape—and that's exactly what the world wants. The world wants us to settle down in its atmosphere, to be in awe of its power, to be impressed with its splendor.

So, in the third year of his reign, Ahasuerus called all his officials, servants, the whole army of Persia and Media, all the governors of the provinces because he's in the middle of strategizing for another military conquest. He's not content just to have northern Greece; he wants all of Greece. He wants Athens. So he's planning a military battle and wants to impress these people with his strength, telling them, "You can trust that I'm going to be able to go through with this."

He's getting all these bigwigs together to have a great exhibition of this king's pomp, power and wealth. He's going to show it all off. He's going to wine and dine them. It takes 180 days to put all his wealth and splendor on display. Can you imagine that? How many days would it take you to put all your wealth and splendor on display? Should I say hours? How many hours would it take you? How many minutes? I mean, this is meant to impress us.

To top it all off, in verse five, at the end of these 180 days, in order to thank the residents of Susa for putting up with all the elephants, tigers, parades and dignitaries coming through, Ahasuerus says, "I'm going to give you a great thank-you feast, you good people, both great and small." Just as Jesus said of the kings of this earth: they loved to call themselves benefactors (Luke 22:24-27). They not only want to be feared and respected, they want to be liked and loved.

So Ahasuerus puts on this feast. There's all this lavish décor we read about in verse six. Archeological discoveries have born out that not only were there golden goblets, there were golden couches in Persia. Lots of wealth. Then in verses seven and following, we see the driveway is covered in gems and precious stones. There's an open bar policy. This king wants everyone to be impressed. We're supposed to be reacting to this description with our jaws dropping and our eyes popping out of our heads. We're supposed to think, "Wow. I want what that king has. I want to be like him."

That's what he wants. He wants us to value what he values. He wants us to join him in seeking satisfaction in the things of this world. Friends, that's exactly what the empire of this world's system wants from you and me in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Tim Cain wrote a great little book on Esther ([The God of Great Reversals](#)) and here's what he said: "The world wants you to give your life trying to get what the king has. The world calls you to do whatever it takes to become more like this king. But the book of Esther comes to unmask the façade and show us the truth."

The writer wants us to see all of this pomp, all of this splendor, and laugh at it. He wants us to see it's an empty show. So he shows us what's really behind all this pomp and splendor. In verse ten, we see that the king is at the end of his seven-day feast and it says, "His heart is merry with wine." That's just a euphemism to say he was shellacked, drunk as a skunk. As the historical records of Herodotus confirm, there was plenty of evidence that this king had many exploits with women.

So here he is with all his men, boasting of all his wealth and splendor, drunk out of his mind, so you can guess where the conversation is turning. Queen Vashti. "Oooh, let me tell you about my beauty queen." He wants to show her off. So he summons her through his seven eunuchs to come and exhibit herself before thousands of drunken men. But every twitter feed in Persia is trending with #Vashtisaidno. Can you believe it? Why wouldn't she want to parade herself before drunken men?

This is a huge insult. Her duty was to uphold the social norms and mores of this culture. Here she is, the queen, refusing to come. She embarrasses the king in front of all the citizens of Susa when he's trying to impress them. Here's this mighty king, but he can't even control his own wife. He has all this power, but he cannot bend the will of one human being. So he's no longer merry with wine; he's drunk with rage and he doesn't know what to do.

He calls for the council of seven princes. Now, if I had to call in seven princes to help me settle a disagreement with Kate, you might wonder about what's really going on. That's what the writer is hoping we'll do. He's hoping we'll start to wonder, "What's behind all this pomp and

splendor?” He’s hoping we’ll start to see that all that glitters is not gold. Things aren’t always what they appear to be.

In this “cabinet meeting,” Memucan escalates the crisis. He blows it all out of proportion, saying, “This isn’t just about you and Vashti, O king. This is an empire-wide crisis. Just think about the slippery slope. If you let your wife get away with this, then every woman in this empire is going to think she can defy the will of her husband.” I love the drama of verse 18: “...*there will be contempt and wrath in plenty.*” We can’t let these women get away with this.

So in verse 19, he does what all bureaucrats do: he makes a law, a royal order. All it does is give Vashti what she wanted in the first place. She didn’t want to come into the king’s presence, so he said, “Okay. You can’t ever come again.” She’s probably thinking, “Great!” It’s absurd. Just imagine, officials going throughout the empire, knocking on doors of humble dwellings in India or Pakistan. “Hello. We’re here from the Persian government. We want to inform you there’s been a crisis with women lately. They’re not obeying their husbands, so we have issued a decree that every woman must do what her husband says. Women must obey. We’re just here on behalf of the king to make sure your wife is following your orders. Can you confirm that, please, sir?”

Can you imagine the absurdity of it all? This is a very low view of marriage. You cannot coerce respect. A relationship that depends on coercion is a relationship of weakness, not of mutual love. If you have to command your wife to respect you, you’re acting more like a Persian dictator. You’re not exercising godly authority; you’re just throwing your weight around.

Here’s the point of Esther 1. This king who looks so powerful is really puny. He seems so mighty, but he is pathetically weak. In fact, as Christopher Ash points out, throughout the whole book, every decision this omnipotent king makes is at the suggestion of someone else. He does not come up with any ideas on his own. This writer wants us to see that the emperor has no clothes. What looks invincible and impressive in this world is a façade—a false and artificial appearance. The world wants you to crave what King Ahasuerus has. It wants you to chase after money, sex and power. The world is saying, “Become more like this king and you’ll be satisfied.”

But the book of Esther is showing you the irony of it all. It’s meant to give you pause and make you think, “Is what I’m chasing after really going to satisfy me in the end? In the end, will I have been chasing a mirage? Am I living for appearances or for reality?” As the hymnwriter says, “Fading are the worldlings’ pleasures, all their boasted pomp and show, solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion’s children know.”

Before you think, “Okay, I see it now; I get it,” don’t underestimate how strong the allure of the world is. Not only does this world want you to desire what King Ahasuerus has, this world is also pursuing you. It’s running after you, the way King Ahasuerus does in Esther 2. You and I are

weaker, more vulnerable and more prone to compromise than we realize. “Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, prone to leave the God I love.”

## **2. We should never underestimate our vulnerability to being seduced by the empty façade of this world.**

That brings us to the second core conviction, the lesson we need to learn and believe if we’re going to live faithfully as exiles in this world. We should never underestimate our vulnerability to being seduced by the empty façade of this world. You and I are very prone to the seduction of this world.

When we get to Esther 2, several years have passed which we know that from the time reference in verse 16. At the beginning of chapter two, it’s about three years later. The king’s armies have advanced against the Greeks and have lost at the battle of Thermopylae. It was a huge defeat. So this king is returning to his throne as a defeated ruler now, and the first readers of Esther would have known this. They would have had this historical fact in their minds. This king has time on his hands and he’s got a wounded ego that needs a massage.

That’s when he remembers Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Just think of how disposable women were in this king’s world. It wasn’t just women; it was men too. You’ve heard about eunuchs. Herodotus, the historian, confirms that during this time, about 500 young boys a year were taken captive by this king and castrated for his service. There was only one reason people existed in that empire: to satisfy the lusts of this king—his lust for power and sex.

So once again, this king listens to the foolish suggestion of his advisors. They’re talking to him. They know he’s feeling this need, this desire, this anger, so they give him counsel. They basically say, “Let’s have an international beauty pageant” “Persian Idol.” We could send royal officers throughout all the provinces; they’ll gather all the beautiful young virgins and put them in your harem. We’ll keep them under custody and pretty them up so that you can try them out, one by one.” That’s what they suggest. It sounds horrific—because it is.

This is where we’re introduced to a man named Mordecai. Mordecai sounds like a Jewish name now, but only because many Jews have taken the name of this character in Esther. This is a very important book to the Jewish people. But in that day, this was not a Jewish name. This was a Persian name. He was named after the god Marduk. We see his ancestry in Esther 2:5, who he’s the descendent of.

What matters for us is he’s from the tribe of Benjamin. That’s the tribe King Saul came from. It also says in verse five he’s “*son of Kish*.” Now, King Saul—hundreds of years earlier—was

the son of a man named Kish. This is all going to become very important in chapter three next week when we're introduced to a man named Haman—"Haman the Agagite." Agag was the king of the Amalekites, the ancient enemies of Israel.

This goes all the way back to the time of the exodus, when the Amalekites were standing in the way of God's people and opposing them. The Lord told His people back in Deuteronomy 25, "You are to remember, and never forget, what the Amalekites have done." The people of Israel were commanded to destroy the Amalekites. When King Saul came onto the scene, God specifically told him, "King Saul, you are to kill the Amalekites." But Saul disobeyed and because of his disobedience God removed him from the throne and judged him. Saul's failure is continuing to bear bitter fruit hundreds of years later in the book of Esther.

Mordecai, a descendent of Saul, is going to have to face the Amalekites in a man named Haman the Agagite. More of that plot is going to develop as the story goes on. But that's Mordecai's ancestry, then we also see his status in verse six. He's in exile. His ancestors, during the time of Jeconiah, king of Judah had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives. Here he is now, generations later, living in exile.

He has settled in quite nicely. He's living among pagan people who don't worship Yahweh, his God, but he likes it anyway. He's happy in this culture—a lot like us who are living in a post-Christian culture. What do we do about that? Do we wring our hands and wish we could turn back the clock and go back to the days when America was a more Christian nation? I think it's dubious whether such days ever really existed.

Or should we look into the Scriptures and find that there were other times in the history of God's people when they had to learn how to live faithfully in the midst of a culture that was hostile to their beliefs and values—like Joseph living in Egypt, or Daniel living in Babylon, or like the early Christians living in the Roman Empire as exiles and strangers in this world. That's where we're at, friends. That's our identity in this world. We are exiles—and so was Mordecai.

So was Mordecai living faithfully or was he blending in? Was he living a life of no compromise or was he assimilating like a chameleon? It's ambiguous. The writer doesn't actually tell us, leaving us wondering. That's when we're introduced to Esther. We see her in verse seven. She's the younger cousin of Mordecai, an orphaned girl, and Mordecai has been raising her. In fact, he adopted her as his own daughter.

There are two things we're told about Esther. First, she's the only person in this book who goes by two names: Hadassah, her Hebrew name, and Esther, her Persian name. So she's straddling two identities, much like you and I are, much like our children will as they grow up in a

culture with spiritual and moral values that are antithetical to the gospel. We have to learn how to live in this world as faithful followers of Christ—how to live as exiles.

Another thing we see about Esther is her appearance. Look at verse seven: *“The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at...”* That’s exactly what this king was looking for. This was a world in which the most important thing in a man was his wealth and power, and the most important thing about a woman was her sexual appeal and physical appearance.

Aren’t you glad we don’t live in a world like that? Boy, have we progressed. Wealth and power? They’re nothing! Sexual appeal and physical beauty? Ah, we’re so much more sophisticated than that. I heard Tim Keller talking about this, commenting that on the surface, this looks awful. This king had hundreds of concubines. We don’t live like that today, right? But how many of us have gone into the privacy of our own room and found some “concubines” on our phone to give us sexual pleasure? We’re really not that different, you see.

For these concubines, their whole life hinged on one night with the king. What happened that night determined everything. How they performed that night set the trajectory for the rest of their lives. Most of them are going to be sent back into that harem, never to get married, never to have children, never to have any kind of freedom in this world. A few of them are going to be called back into the king’s chambers once in a while, on a whim, and maybe if they’re lucky they’ll bear a child who will have royal status. But for the vast majority, that one night with the king was all they’d get. Their whole future depended on how they performed—and that’s exactly what this world is like.

This world says, “What’s on the outside matters more than what’s on the inside. Appearances matter more than character. What you have matters more than who you are.” Keller comments that in order to win the favor of this world, you and I have to go through beauty treatments. We have to go through a regimen, like Esther and these concubines had to go through. And it’s not just women; it’s men too.

The world is saying, “Unless you get these things—money, power, worldly pomp and splendor, sex appeal, a perfect body—you’re worthless. That’s why we go through the beauty treatments of this world. That’s why we suffer from eating disorders. That’s why we sell ourselves out for a little bit of financial gain. All because the world is demanding it from us. The world is saying, “If you want to be something, if you want to mean something, if you want to matter here, you’ve got to perform. Show us what you’ve got. If we like it, you’ll get your chance to get ahead. If we don’t, we’ll chew you up, spit you out and forget that we ever tasted you.”

All of us are more enticed and more vulnerable to seduction from this world than we realize. Don't be naïve. Don't underestimate the world's power over you. All of us care more about outward appearances than we might want to admit. We pass over people who don't look a certain way, who haven't achieved a certain status, who haven't made it in this world. And when we find someone who has, we're impressed. We want to live in the limelight of their success. We want to have a piece of what they have. "Give me their beauty, their money, their power, their talent."

The culture around us has that kind of power to get underneath our skin, and wrap its tentacles around our hearts and say to us, "You've got to go through our beauty treatments or you're worthless." Keller put it like this: "We've all been concubines to this world's system. We've all been tempted to sell out to this culture's values." All of us have, in one way or another. It's not easy to stand up against this world's allurements and say, "No, I won't be seduced by your power, your wealth, your vanity."

Just look at Esther in verse eight. She's taken. It says "*taken...*" She doesn't have a dad like Liam Neeson to come and get her back. It appears she has no choice. She's put under custody and she's very pleasing to Hegai, the king's eunuch. She wins his favor, so he gives her cosmetics and food from the king's household. Young women are her ladies in waiting and she advanced.

Verse ten is the key: "*Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known.*" She's concealing her identity. She's doing it because that's what her adopted father tells her to do. We aren't sure what motivated him to say that, but it's probably out of real fear that there could be a genocide. That's what's in the works in this culture for Jewish people. So in verse 11, he's checking in on her every day. And in verse 15, the year when her beauty treatments are over—she's gone through the whole regimen for a year—she's winning favor with everyone and she enters the king's palace. Verse 17 says, "*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.*" He gives a great feast, a wedding reception, in verse 18.

What I want to know is, at what price? We don't know what's been going through Esther's mind. Is she enjoying all this? Is she taking advantage of this situation and using her beauty to rise to power? We can't see her motives. The questions we want to ask, this author is not going to answer. Everything is murky. Everything is ambiguous. Does she have any other choice? Did she have to break the law of God by eating the king's food? Did she have to sleep with a man to whom she was not married? Did she have to marry a pagan king?

At this very time in Israel's history, Ezra and Nehemiah were condemning God's people for doing this very thing. But did Esther have any other options? Could she have done what Daniel

did? Could she have refused and said, “I will not eat food from the king’s table”? We really don’t know, do we? It’s all ambiguous.

Friends, life in this world confronts us with choices and they’re not always easy. They’re not always clear cut. It’s not all black and white. There’s a lot of shades of gray. You need an immense amount of wisdom and prayer and the fear of God to make the right choices. You’ve got to fall on His grace sometimes, don’t you? It’s really hard for us to judge other people for the choices they’re making.

But have you noticed so far what’s missing in all of this? Esther’s a very unusual book in the Bible. I should have said, “Who is missing in all this?” Where is God? His name has not even been mentioned. Mordecai says nothing about the Lord. Esther says nothing about the Lord. There’s no prayer. There’s no mention of God’s law. The only connection to the rest of the Bible so far has come through Mordecai’s ancestry—and it will be this way throughout the whole book. God’s name is never mentioned in the book of Esther. No one prays to Him.

God’s absence is intentional. The writer of this book did not make a mistake. He did not get to the end and say, “Oh, nuts, I’ve run out of ink; I’m at the end of the scroll and I forgot to mention God.” That’s not what’s happening here. This is an intentional literary device to teach us a very important lesson. Karen Jobes puts it like this: “God is omnipotently present, even where God is most conspicuously absent.”

God was present in chapter one at the king’s feast. When that king got drunk and flew into that drunken rage and banished Queen Vashti, that was God’s work, because that results in a Hebrew girl named Hadassah ending up becoming queen of the Persian Empire. A series of ordinary events puts this girl on the throne and these ordinary events are going to result in the preservation of the Jewish people from genocide. If they had been killed off, God’s promises to Abraham would have failed. And if that had happened, there would be no Messiah, no Redeemer, no Savior, no Jesus.

Stephen Witmer says, “God is at work everywhere, but very often we don’t see Him. Very often His hand is hidden. Maybe we see it, but only after the fact, or perhaps only in heaven. The author of Esther is giving us a picture of what life actually feels like.” I think that is the key that unlocks the profound meaning of this book.

When I made my commitment to Jesus as a 16-year-old, I really thought I’d feel God’s presence powerfully all the time. I think when we come to a book like Esther, we’re hoping that God is going to do something miraculous. Open the Red Sea. Send down plagues on the people who want to destroy the Jews. But none of that happened. Just ordinary life going on—simple,

ordinary, daily choices. But behind it all, God is at work. God is a God of providence and He's unfolding His purposes for His people.

If you want to live faithfully as an exile in this world, you've got to get this conviction firmly in your mind: God is always working, usually behind the scenes. But that hidden God is very present and very active. If you want to live a life of no compromise for Jesus, it's got to comfort you that God is really there. He is really present. Otherwise it's going to be really easy for you to be seduced.

### **3. There is a nobler King and He delights in you.**

This brings us to where we come today—to the Lord's Table—and the third conviction we need to have in our minds if we're going to live faithfully as exiles in this world. There is a nobler King than Ahasuerus. Praise God for that! And He delights in His people. We don't know if Esther compromised. We don't know if Mordecai compromised. The Bible doesn't say. All it says is that they concealed their identity. There's no moral judgment given here. But if they did compromise, God is not done working in them.

And if you have compromised, God's not done working in you either. When we compromise, we need to fall on God's grace, right? Here's what Keller says: "The message of the Bible is that God persistently and continuously gives His grace to people who don't ask for it, don't deserve it and don't even fully appreciate it after they get it, over and over again."

Esther is going to experience God's grace. Mordecai is going to experience His grace. You and I have experienced His grace. And how is that possible? It's because there's a nobler King than Xerxes Who never compromised. When Satan, the emperor of this world, took Jesus up to the high mountain and showed Him all the kingdoms of this world, he said, "If You will just make this one little compromise, if You will just fall down and worship me, all this worldly pomp and power can be Yours. I'll give it to You, Jesus." But Jesus said, "No. I will be faithful."

And in being faithful, He experienced more suffering than any human being has ever suffered, because He put God first. He chose the cross, not the crown. Because of that, what does the Bible say? God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of King Jesus—not King Xerxes, not King Ahasuerus. They're dead. But at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess—what? He is Lord (Philippians 2:1-11).

The wonder of it all is that He's a King Who desires you. He's the King Who delights in you. He's the King Who shows favor to you. And He doesn't do it by sending out His officers to capture you and take you by force. He doesn't put you through a regimen of beauty treatments to decide

whether He's going to delight in you or not. He doesn't chew you up and spit you out, using you for His own selfish purposes.

He is the most selfless King, the most lovely King, the most loving King. He came and He said, "Be Mine." And to win us to Himself, He stooped to the lowest place. He had no form, no beauty, that we should be drawn to Him (Isaiah 53:2). We looked at Him and we turned away. We were repulsed by His appearance. He was crushed and He was wounded for our transgressions (Isaiah 53:5). But if we have eyes to see what really matters, if we have eyes to see what is truly beautiful and truly lovely, we will look at that Man of Sorrows, Who was so torn beyond human semblance and Whose visage was so marred, we will look at Him at the cross and we will say, "That is true beauty. That is true love. That is my King. He's the most beautiful of all."

It's what George Herbert, the poet, said of Jesus at the cross:

Thou art my loveliness, my life, my light  
Beauty alone to me:  
Thy bloody death and undeserved  
Makes Thee pure red and white.

That's how you live faithfully as an exile in this world. You realize, "I'm loved by the true King. I'm loved by the nobler King. I'm loved by the King of real splendor, real wealth, real power. He delights in me, favors me and crowns me with His love and compassion." You feast at His table, eating from the abundance of His household, drinking from the river of His delights. You taste this bounty as a sweet appetizer of the real wedding feast that's going to come.

And you say, in the face of all this world has to offer, "What Jesus gives is not a façade. This is real. This is true. This is lasting. This is satisfying. This is beauty. This is where I find my all." Let's do that as we come together to the Table of our King.

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