

# **BUILD-A-BELIEVER WORKSHOPS**

## **Ezra Nehemiah Esther**

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*People say to me, "How do you build a church?" You don't build a church, you build a believer. As a result, the church will build itself. (John MacArthur).*

### **Esther** Chapter Two

#### *"Beauty is Only Sin Deep"*

#### Introduction

I'd like to tell you the tale of the boiling frog. It says that if you throw a frog in boiling water it will quickly jump out. But if you put a frog in a pan of room temperature water and raise the temperature ever so slowly, the frog will adapt to the subtle changes, not realizing the danger it's in even when the water begins boiling. The frog will eventually cook to death.

The tale of the boiling frog is often used as a sermon illustration to describe the gradual desensitization of believers within a steadily deteriorating culture. We tend to adapt to the subtle changes, not realizing the ever-increasing danger we are in.

It's one of the great sermon illustration – *except that it's entirely false!* According to Dr. Victor Hutchison, a Research Professor Emeritus from the University of Oklahoma's Department of Zoology, (and I quote):

The legend [of the boiling frog] is entirely incorrect! The 'critical thermal maxima' of many species of frogs have been determined by several investigators. In this procedure, the water in which a frog is submerged is heated gradually at about 2 degrees Fahrenheit per minute. As the temperature of the water is gradually increased, the frog will eventually become more and more active in attempts to escape the heated water. If the container size and opening allow the frog to jump out, it will do so.

The frog-tale might be bogus; but our desensitization is not. Our culture is steadily deteriorating. We do tend to adapt to the subtle changes, not realizing the ever-increasing danger we are in.

I could use the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) movie ratings system as an example. Every Christian parent knows that movies which would have been rated R or even NC-17 just a few years ago are routinely rated PG or PG-13.

The views and values of our culture are reaching an immoral boiling point. If we were frogs, we would be jumping out of the boil.

As we meet Esther for the first time, we are confronted with a young Jewish woman surrounded by a culture that started at an immoral boiling point and was getting gradually worse. Rather than jumping-out when she had the chance (by returning to Jerusalem), she remained behind and was getting more-and-more desensitized.

We'll organize our thoughts around two points: #1 You Are Being Desensitized To Compromise Your Values, and #2 You Are Being Desensitized To Conceal Your Vows.

#1 You Are Being Desensitized  
To Compromise Your Values  
(v1-14)

Our story opened (in chapter one) in the palaces of Persia, where King Ahasuerus was throwing a feast. His queen, Vashti, had refused to come at his bidding. Ahasuerus decreed a law that Vashti should no longer be queen. We pick-up the story some few months after those events.

Esther 2:1 After these things, when the wrath of King Ahasuerus subsided, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed against her.

Esther 2:2 Then the king's servants who attended him said: "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king;

Esther 2:3 and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the citadel, into the women's quarters, under the custody of Hegai the king's eunuch, custodian of the women. And let beauty preparations be given *them*.

Esther 2:4 Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This thing pleased the king, and he did so.

Think *American Idol* and you'll get the picture. These young women were not rounded-up in midnight raids against their will. They wanted to be queen. They auditioned to be queen.

I'm sure there were preliminary rounds. There were hundreds or perhaps even thousands of young women who did not make the cut. Others did, and were sent on to Shushan to chase this once-in-a-lifetime dream. The Jewish historian, Josephus, says there were around four hundred of these finalists. One of them was Esther – probably in her early 20's.

Esther 2:5 In Shushan the citadel there was a certain Jew whose name was Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.  
Esther 2:6 *Kish* had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been captured with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.  
Esther 2:7 And *Mordecai* had brought up Hadassah, that *is*, Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman was lovely and beautiful. When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

Before the Persians ruled, it was the Babylonians. Mordecai had been taken captive by the Babylonians, probably in the second of their three assaults upon Jerusalem. He had a younger cousin, whose Hebrew name was Hadassah, whose parents may have been killed in one of the sieges of Jerusalem. In Persia he raised her as Esther as his would his own daughter.

Much emphasis is placed on Mordecai's genealogy. It is to highlight the fact that he instead chose to keep his nationality hidden. He doesn't reveal that he is a Jew until chapter three. While men like Ezra and Nehemiah were risking everything for the sake of following God, Mordecai was content to deny his heritage and live as a Gentile. He was not walking with or living for the Lord.

Given the opportunity to return to Jerusalem, Mordecai remained. It was not a sin to remain. Many who remained supported those who returned. But you see no support for them from Mordecai or Esther. They wouldn't even admit they were Jews.

Esther 2:8 So it was, when the king's command and decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, *under* the custody of Hegai, that Esther also was taken to the king's palace, into the care of Hegai the custodian of the women.

Let's be honest about Esther. When we first meet her, she is not walking with or living for the Lord. Esther willingly entered the pageant as a candidate to become his queen. There is no indication in the language of the story that she was forced against her will. When the writer says she was *taken to the king's palace*, the verb *taken* is not a word that connotes force or capture. It is the same word used to describe Mordecai's adoption of Esther.

Esther should not have been a participant in this pageant; but she was. She became more-and-more desensitized day-by-day:

Esther 2:9 Now the young woman pleased him, and she obtained his favor; so he readily gave beauty preparations to her, besides her allowance. Then seven choice maidservants were provided for her from the king's palace, and he moved her and her maidservants to the best *place* in the house of the women.

The Jews were under strict Old Testament dietary regulations which kept them separate from other people. In her *preparations* and *allowance* Esther ate foods which were prohibited for a Jew. Esther willingly ignored these dietary regulations, showing no regard for God's law. Compare her to Daniel, when he was a young man taken against his will by the Babylonians. When they wanted to prepare him for a career in Babylon, he refused to eat his allowance of things which were not Kosher.

Esther 2:10 Esther had not revealed her people or family, for Mordecai had charged her not to reveal *it*.

Esther 2:11 And every day Mordecai paced in front of the court of the women's quarters, to learn of Esther's welfare and what was happening to her.

It's true that Esther was being obedient to Mordecai. But it's one of those situations where she ought to have obeyed God rather than man. It was not a crime to be a Jew in Persia. There was anti-Semitism, but open persecution had not yet broken out. She concealed her identity in order to live comfortably and get farther in the world.

Mordecai's pacing is the activity of a man who is relying on human wisdom rather than God's will. Although God will definitely use both Mordecai and Esther, they were not in His will at this time.

Dr. J. Vernon McGee points out that Mordecai and Esther were in God's providence. I like his definition of providence: Providence is the way that God leads the man that will not be led.

Esther 2:12 Each young woman's turn came to go in to King Ahasuerus after she had completed twelve months' preparation, according to the regulations for the women, for thus were the days of their preparation apportioned: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with perfumes and preparations for beautifying women.

Esther 2:13 Thus *prepared*, each young woman went to the king, and she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the women's quarters to the king's palace.

This was a spa vacation to die for! Six months of beautification treatments. Exercise... nutrition... cosmetics... massage... facials... hair and nails... fashion consulting... etiquette courses. You name it; they did it!

Esther 2:14 In the evening she went, and in the morning she returned to the second house of the women, to the custody of [Ryan Seacrest] Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who kept the concubines. She would not go in to the king again unless the king delighted in her and called for her by name.

- being changed to bring change -  
In the evening she went [to the king], and in the morning she returned... It was a beauty pageant that included having sex with the only judge. Esther knew this, but willingly participated.

It goes without saying that God's Law prohibited sex outside of marriage – let alone with a non-Jew. Note, too, that if Esther was not chosen queen, she would instead become a member of the king's harem. She would be called upon from time-to-time to go in and satisfy him sexually. She wouldn't simply walk away and return to her life.

Mordecai and Esther were blowing it. Living in Persia, they had become too Persian. It's all an example to us of spiritual desensitization.

It can be tough to remain spiritually sensitive in a culture like ours. Every day, by multiple means, you are bombarded with ideas and images that are designed to erode your views and values.

What can you do? The only people in our story who were not being desensitized were those who had returned to Jerusalem when given the opportunity. Their example to us is to stay connected with the things of God by obeying His Word and gathering together with His people.

## #2 You Are Being Desensitized To Conceal Your Vows (v15-18)

Esther is going to get chosen. She is going to marry King Ahasuerus. Forgive the pun, but it was the ‘crowning’ moment she had been dreaming of!

Esther 2:15 Now when the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his daughter, to go in to the king, she requested nothing but what Hegai the king’s eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her.

Hegai was like her personal trainer – taking her natural beauty as far as it would go. Over-and-over Esther’s outward, physical beauty is stressed.

Up to this point, it’s all outward. Esther has no inward, spiritual beauty to commend her – not yet. It is always the inner person God is concerned with.

The overwhelming emphasis in our culture on physical beauty is one of the key ways the world desensitizes believers. Our attention is constantly drawn to the physical, keeping our minds off the spiritual.

Esther 2:16 So 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.  
Esther 2:17 The king loved Esther more than all the *other* women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so he set the royal crown upon her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Don't get fooled by the word **loved**. The pagan king was incapable of the higher love that comes from God. He preferred Esther and loved her as much as you could in the flesh. There was no spiritual component to it. This is not the fairy-tale romance that every girl desires. Vashti had once been in Esther's position. The way of the world tells us that Esther would one day be in Vashti's position. They would not live happily ever after, growing old together. Esther's husband would continue to sleep with his many concubines. Esther could never know true love – unless Ahasuerus converted to become a Jew. Not likely – especially since Esther was ashamed to even tell him about Jehovah.

Esther 2:18 Then the king made a great feast, the Feast of Esther, for all his officials and servants; and he proclaimed a holiday in the provinces and gave gifts according to the generosity of a king.

An inevitable component of this feast, and of her new lifestyle, was that Esther must worship as a Persian. It was almost five years from the time Esther became queen to the time she revealed her true identity as a Jew. As queen she ate, dressed, and acted like a Persian - *and that included worshipping like a Persian.*

God considered Himself the Husband of the Jews; they were His wife. To marry this pagan king; to worship his pagan gods; was to conceal her vows to Jehovah. It was to commit spiritual adultery.

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You will be more sensitive to becoming desensitized if you look at it in these romantic terms. As a Christian, you are described as being engaged to Jesus. He is portrayed as your future Bridegroom, and you as His waiting bride. Your relationship is a love affair.

When the world beckons to you, it is as a harlot seeking to woo you away from your Beloved Bridegroom. It can be a worldly idea or ideal; it can be a worldly activity; it can be a worldly pursuit. These things may or may not be sinful to begin with. But they slowly begin to boil around you until you are cooked by them.

Typically we make lists of the worldly things we must avoid at all costs. Those can be helpful, I suppose. It's better to set your inward

affections on things above. It's better to have your heart consumed with the pursuit of God. Then the harlot has no appeal for you.

Applying God's Word...

If you are not a believer, you can become a King Ahasuerus. You can have it all, by the world's standards. You can enjoy immense physical pleasures. But you will be an empty shell of a person – never knowing true love, never being satisfied. Let Jesus reign as king instead of seeking to rule your own worldly empire.

Believers should let the Word of God prick them – to be sure you are remaining sensitive to spiritual things. Even though God will bring Esther to a place of obedience and use her mightily... It wasn't worth the initial compromise of her spiritual life.

You want to be an Ezra, not an Esther. Ezra was in the Word of God and among the people of God. He chose to suffer with them rather than remain in the world. His way was hard; but his heart was full.



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