

ESTHER

For Such A Time As This

by

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CHAPTER TWO

THE QUEST FOR A QUEEN

IN THE STUDY and interpretation of history there is often room for great diversity of opinion. What seems to be most important to one may appear quite trivial to another. And what seems to be right to one may seem all wrong to another. The chapter now before us may serve as a good illustration of this. Did Esther do wrong in hiding her identity, or was she justified in so doing? Was Mordecai at fault when he charged his cousin not to show **“her people nor her kindred”**? Some would answer these questions in the affirmative and some in the negative. The best we can do under the circumstances is to carefully study the facts as here presented and seek by God’s help to understand them aright.

It is held by some that there is an interval of no great length between chapters 1 and 2 of our book. Nevertheless, it would take some time to send letters to all of the king’s provinces inasmuch as means of communication was much slower then than they are now. And that would give ample time for the king to think things over. We read that **“the wrath of king Ahasuerus was appeased.”**

The meaning of the word for appeased is an interesting one. It is the same word which is translated **“assuaged”** in Genesis 8:1 where it has reference to the subsiding of the waters of the Flood in the days of Noah. We find it again in Esther 7:10 where it is rendered **“pacified.”** We know that he had been **“very wroth, and his anger burned in him”** (Esther 1:12). Now that he is sober again, and has had time to reflect on what had been done **“he remembered Vashti, and what she had done, and what was decreed against her.”** More than one commentator has detected here a note of remorse. And one can well see how that might have been the case. Had he been left to himself, he might even have reinstated Vashti. But those who surrounded him would not allow that to happen. The laws of the Medes and Persians may not be changed.

Dr. Ira M. Price in *The Dramatic Story of Old Testament History* takes the view that there was an interval of four years between chapters 1 and 2 of our book, during which “Xerxes was actively engaged in the tremendous overland and sea expeditions against the hated Greeks, who had burned Sardis and otherwise defied the power of Persia. After the disastrous outcome of the entire enterprise at Platea, in 479 B.C., the defeated monarch returned to his capital, humiliated and dishonored in the eyes of his realm.”

“Then said the king’s servants that ministered unto him, Let there be fair young virgins sought for the king.”

It was in this way that they would implement the suggestion they had made that Vashti’s royal estate should be given to another, better than she. We note that nothing is said about the social or political qualifications of the prospective queen. Neither is there any reference here to the education or training she should have for the high office she was to hold.

Apparently the only qualifications necessary were physical. She must be a fair, young virgin. In this respect the whole proposition differs little from the way in which a movie star might be chosen in our day and time. It is a matter of common knowledge that Hollywood is constantly in search of “fresh faces.” It appears that even when they discover them, they soon lose their freshness after they have been cast in their second or third film. And so the quest continues.

The search for a new queen for the Persians extended to the remotest corners of the empire. Elaborate machinery was set up so that no possible candidate would be overlooked. The ministers of Ahasuerus suggested that **“the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather together all the fair young virgins unto Shushan the palace, to the house of the women, unto the custody of Hege the king’s chamberlain, keeper of the women”** and that their things for purification be given to them. **“And let the maiden which pleaseth the king be queen instead of Vashti.”** Evidently this met with the royal approval because we read that **“the thing pleased the king; and he did so.”**

By **“the house of the women”** we are to understand what we would call *a harem*, that part of an oriental palace or house reserved for the residence of women. King Solomon must have had something like this to accommodate his many wives and concubines. Such an institution naturally accompanies polygamy. **“Hege the king’s chamberlain”** who was in charge was probably some eunuch, perhaps the chief eunuch. He **“was usually a repulsive old man, on whom the court ladies are very dependent, and whose favour they are always desirous to secure”** (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown).

The fact that things were given them for **“purification”** indicates that the king must have been considered almost divine. **“It would have been well if the divinity had been himself less impure”** (Pulpit Commentary). But like a good many today they had double standards, one for the king and another for the people. And there is still many a man who demands utmost purity in the girl he expects to marry, but who has no thought of offering her as much as he expects.

In contrast to all of the above we now have introduced one who is to have a very important place in this whole story. **“In Shushan the palace there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.”** We note that his genealogy was well kept even though he was there in exile.

He **“had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.”**

According to II Chronicles 36 there were three different deportations of Jews from Jerusalem in the days of Nebuchadnezzar.

- The first came in the days of Jehoiakim;
- The second, in the days of his son Jehoiachin;
- The third, in the days of Zedekiah.

No doubt the Jeconiah referred to here is the same as Jehoiachin, who was carried away captive in 597 B.C. If Mordecai was among those carried away at that time, he would now be a very old man. Therefore, it has been thought that the first part of verse 6 refers to his ancestor, Kish.

Grammatically, the pronoun who might refer to either one. For our present purpose it is not of sufficient importance to go into great detail in connection with it. Some commentators take one view, and some the other. It is sufficient for us to know that he was a descendant of Benjamin and thus a member of the tribe from which the first king of Israel was taken.

Evidently Mordecai was a kindly man for **“he brought up Hadassah, that is, Esther, his uncle’s daughter: for she had neither father nor mother, and the maid was fair and beautiful; whom Mordecai, when her father and mother were dead, took for his own daughter.”**

This is indeed a lovely touch in a chapter which leaves the impression that women were considered just so many objects which might be shoved around to suit their masters. Mordecai, being a Jew, would know that the law of Moses says, **“Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child”** (Exodus 22:22). But he was a man who did more than the law required. His obedience to it was not merely negative, it was positive. It is no wonder then that some commentators have considered him as a type of our Lord Jesus Christ. Here at any rate he acted in the manner of the Lord who **“relieveth the fatherless and the widow”** (Psalm 146:9).

The fact that Esther had two names reminds us of Daniel and his companions. It may be that she got the name Esther in the same way that they got the names by which they were to be known in the court of Nebuchadnezzar. Her parents had given her the name Hadassah, the meaning of which is myrtle.

The name Esther was probably derived from *Ishtar, the chief goddess of the Babylonians and Assyrians*. This name was probably given to her after she was introduced into the harem of King Ahasuerus. It is not difficult to trace a connection between Ishtar and star. According to good authority, Ishtar was the Persian name for the star Venus. If it was Hege who gave her this name, it may be that she had won his favor from the very beginning, and that this name was to be prophetic of her success in the contest for the queenship.

“So it came to pass, when the king’s commandment and his decree was heard, and when many maidens were gathered together unto Shushan the palace, to the custody of Hegai, that Esther was brought also unto the king’s house, to the custody of Hegai, keeper of the women.”

From this verse it is clearly seen that this was no mere beauty contest. These virgins were not invited to compete with each other for some coveted prize. While it is true that in a modern beauty contest only one can win, nevertheless, those who do not win are still free to go their own way. Such was not the case here. And one can readily see that no woman would care to go into seclusion for the rest of her life simply because she did not please a capricious man. And in view of this we can also understand why some of the older Jewish commentators and interpreters thought that Mordecai had actually tried to keep his cousin out of all this. But he really had no choice in the matter. It was “**the king’s commandment and his decree**,” hardly to be compared with that of a modern constitutional monarch when he requests a command performance.

It is generally held that the Hegai who was in charge of these women is the same as the Hege of verse 3. And we are told that “**the maiden pleased him, and she obtained kindness of him**,” that is, he favored her. Evidently she made a very favorable impression at once. And it is right here that we begin to see the hand of Him who is not even mentioned by name in this book. But for all that she was favorably received, she had to go through the required procedure for purification. And Hegai “**speedily gave her her things for purification, with such things as belonged to her**,” or, “*her portions*,” according to commentators.

These portions probably included her food and other necessities. In other words, from now on she would be supported by the king which would be little enough in comparison with all that she had to sacrifice. The “**seven maidens, which were meet to be given her, out of the king’s house**,” were appointed to attend her in rotation, one for every day of the week.

As a mark of the high esteem in which Hegai held Esther, “**he preferred her and her maids unto the best place of the house of the women**.” He removed her, which seems to imply that when she first came into the king’s house she had been assigned to a place that was not too nice.

In this we may see further evidence of the providence of God. And we have reason to believe that He still works in behalf of His own in similar fashion in our day and time. While much is made of the ill treatment which many of the children of God receive at the hands of the world, we must not overlook the fact that there are also many favors shown us which we cannot account for except that God has been working in our behalf.

Meanwhile “**Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it**.”

Perhaps if we knew all the circumstances we might understand this better. It is quite possible, of course, that the primary purpose in thus hiding her identity was to protect her from violence. We may be sure that she was not “**preferred . . . to the best place of the house of the women**” without provoking some to jealousy. And we all know that jealousy can be as cruel as the grave. But in due time she will have to reveal who she is. Of that we have had some examples in our own day. Before the rise of Hitler in Germany there were many Jews who had become so completely identified with the German people that they were no longer referred to as Jews but as Germans. But He who had distinguished His “**ancient people**” from all other peoples would not allow that to go on.

And so we can see the hand of God even in the machinations of a man like Adolf Hitler. No doubt there were Jews in Germany who hid their identity because of personal advantage. But we must not on that account impugn the motives of Mordecai in charging his cousin not to show **“her people nor her kindred.”** We like to believe that he was seeking to shield her from all unnecessary hatred and violence in a time that was not free of anti-Semitism, as we shall see later in our studies.

Since there are those who still question the ethics of all this, it should be pointed out that it is not unethical to withhold information, the revealing of which would serve no good purpose. The fact that Esther did not make known her people nor her kindred certainly did not cause others to suffer. And if, as we have suggested, Mordecai did not want his cousin to get involved in all of this in the first place, then we can see that it was fear rather than ambition which prompted him to charge his cousin as he did.

That he was not completely at ease even after she had been shown favor in the royal harem is indicated in that he **“walked every day before the court of the women’s house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her.”** Because of this it has been thought that he was one of the porters whose business it was to watch the entrance to the palace. It is almost necessary to suppose something like this otherwise it would be difficult to explain his presence there at that time.

To those of us who are accustomed to the modern way of doing things in a hurry what we have here may seem like a waste of time. According to verse 12 of this chapter it took one whole year to prepare these women for their presentation to the king. As we have noticed before, nothing is said about any intellectual or spiritual preparation. That seems not to have been important. The phrase **“according to the manner of the women”** is to be understood as *“according to the law for the women.”* According to one commentator, this means that which “was probably required by state etiquette.” On the other hand, it is quite likely that some of the **“fair young virgins”** gathered there at that time had come from homes that were none too clean or sanitary. Hence, one can see the necessity for a long season of purification before they might be introduced to his majesty.

We note that these purifications were accomplished first of all **“with oil of myrrh”** for six months. Myrrh served a double purpose in that it was not only fragrant, it was also credited with having purifying powers as well. It was an ingredient in the holy anointing oil used in the anointing of the priests in Israel (See Exodus 30:22-33). It was among the gifts presented by the Magi when they came from the East to worship our Lord Jesus soon after His birth. (See Matthew 2:11). It was mingled with the wine which was offered to Him when He was suffering upon the cross, **“but he received it not”** (Mark 15:23). And finally, it was used at His burial when Nicodemus **“brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight”** (John 19:39).

From this it will be seen that myrrh had a variety of uses. But the myrrh that is mentioned here is different from that which is mentioned in Genesis 37:25 and 43:11, where a different word is used in the Hebrew.

The word used here in the Book of Esther means “*distilling in drops*” suggestive of tears. And while it is not to be supposed that the Persians saw any spiritual significance in this, it is not difficult for the child of God to see that purification before God may be, and usually is, accompanied by tears. But when He who “**by himself purged our sins**” comes forth in His royal robes, we are told that all of His garments smell of myrrh and aloes and cassia (Psalm 45:8). And it may be that the Persian custom of purification had its beginnings in that which was originally a divine institution. In any case such a supposition is not unreasonable because the instructions given to Moses in Exodus 30 antedated this chapter by a thousand years.

In addition to the myrrh there were “**sweet odors . . . with other things for the purifying of the women.**” Since nothing is said about the composition of these things, we cannot comment on them. It appears that the women were permitted to request whatever else they might think necessary over and above that which had been prescribed by law. Knowing something of the sensuality and lust of such men as Xerxes, it is possible that some of these virgins would provide themselves with an aphrodisiac to arouse his passions even more. So much was at stake. If a virgin failed to delight him, “**she came in unto the king no more.**” Small reward indeed for a whole year of preparation!

How different the case of one who has prepared himself for the service of the King of kings! He, too, may be privileged to spend but a short time “on the field.” But we may be sure that he will not be cast off on that account. Nay, rather, he will find that the King will delight in him, and he will yet be “called by name” to enter into the joy of his Lord.

When Esther’s turn came “**to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king’s chamberlain, the keeper of the women appointed.**” We are not told how her turn was determined. It may be that they cast lots for that. But whether or not, she required no extras to make her more desirable to the man whom she probably had not even seen until then. If she was at all anxious about the outcome, we are not told about it here. “**And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all them that looked upon her.**”

Since it was not the custom for women to appear in the presence of men unveiled, we conclude that those who looked upon her were women, probably her companions in the “**house of the women,**” and the eunuch who was in charge of them.

“**So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.**”

The tenth month here corresponds to the latter part of December and the earlier part of January of our present calendar. This is the only time that “**the month Tebeth**” is mentioned in Scripture. But the interesting thing about it is that it is also called “**the tenth month,**” which is the tenth month of the Jewish sacred year and the fourth month of their civil year. And it may be that here we have another one of those incidental references which show that even though God is not mentioned by name in this book, He is not left without witness. “**The tenth month**” was dated from the Passover, the great memorial of Israel’s redemption from the bondage of Egypt.

“And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti.”

And this is the only reference to love that we have in all of this book, and it is here only that we find the combination **“grace and favor,”** two words which are much used elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe God’s attitude toward His people. It is truly remarkable to find them here in this story. But we need not be surprised that terms like these should persist even though the One who ever stands ready to bestow His grace and favor on those who draw nigh to Him has become **“the unknown God.”**

What follows here also seems to be after the divine pattern. **“Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther’s feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.”** In thus sharing his joy with his princes and his servants the king shows a different spirit from that which he manifested when Vashti refused to obey his royal summons. The fact that this is called **“Esther’s feast”** suggests that this may have been her coronation feast. According to Dr. Jamieson, her crown consisted only of a purple fillet streaked with white, having the appearance of a crown of towers, bound around the forehead. And on the basis of the rendering given in the Septuagint, he says that the feast was really a marriage feast. There is no reason why both ideas may not be combined here.

According to the Pulpit Commentary, the **“release”** was an exemption from taxation, or from military service, or from both, for a specified period. It may be of interest to note that the word for release is not the same as that used in Deuteronomy 15 in connection with the year of jubilee.

One can easily see that this, as well as the giving of gifts, may be used as an illustration of what takes place when we are received by divine grace into God’s loving favor. It is said of our Lord that **“when he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men”** (Ephesians 4:8). And all of this is **“according to the state of the king.”** When we apply that to the King of kings, we find that no earthly monarch can compare with Him; and what happened that day in the Persian palace is like the flicker of a candle in the light of the noonday sun. Our Lord **“has raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places so that in the ages to come He may shew the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through Christ Jesus”** (see Ephesians 2:6, 7).

There is a break at this point in our chapter. A second gathering of virgins probably took place sometime after the events which we have just been considering. What the purpose of this gathering may have been, we are not told. But the fact that **“then Mordecai sat in the king’s gate”** sounds as though he had been promoted. Besides the ordinary use of the gates of a city as a place of entry, they were also the place where important business was transacted. Of that we have a good illustration in the case of Boaz and the near kinsman when the question respecting Ruth and the inheritance was decided by ten men of the elders of the city who sat there as judges (See Ruth 4:1, 2). It looks as though Lot occupied a similar position in the city of Sodom (Genesis 19:1). With such instances before us it would appear as though Mordecai had been promoted to such a place of honor also.

Parenthetically, as it were, we are told that **“Esther had not yet shewed her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.”**

The fact that she was now queen of the empire did not cause her to change her attitude toward the one who had befriended her when she was left an orphan. Very often, as some of us know from experience, such is not the case. Such obedience and such respect have become the exception rather than the rule in these days.

“In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king’s gate, two of the king’s chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus.”

This verse seems to confirm the view that Mordecai was now in a position of trust and honor. And that will explain how it was that the conspiracy against the life of King Ahasuerus was known to him. The two men named in this verse evidently occupied a position of special trust also. If the Bigthan mentioned here is the Bigtha mentioned in Esther 1:10, then he was one who served in the very presence of the king himself. Together with Teresh he was charged with the keeping of the door of the king’s sleeping apartment. (See 6:2). Thus they might quite readily lay hand on the king and kill him. Just what their grievance was we are not told.

Some think that they wanted to avenge Vashti, and that it was she who instigated this plot. But there is nothing in the sacred record to support that view. There probably was some other reason for their anger. And it looks as though they may have confided in a third party who in turn told it to Mordecai. And then he **“told it unto Esther the queen.”** She told it to the king **“in Mordecai’s name.”** This last seems to further confirm the view that Mordecai was now holding a responsible position as he sat in the gate. Otherwise his name would not have meant very much to the king.

But judgment was not pronounced on the guilty pair until **“inquisition was made of the matter.”** And then **“it was found out”**; that is, it was found to be true. And **“therefore they were both hanged on a tree.”** According to the great historian, Herodotus, this was the punishment usually meted out to rebels and traitors in Persia in those days. And the historiographers of that day made a record of it **“in the book of the chronicles of the king.”** And there the matter rested until a later day.

Apparently nothing more was done for Mordecai at that time. He may have resented that. That would be perfectly natural. But his case was in the hands of a higher Judge who saw in secret and one day rewarded him openly.

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