

Sermon – 05/07/2009 am

Esther Made Queen

Study Text: Esther 2

When Queen Vashti disobeyed the order of King Xerxes to come to his party he removed her from his presence for good. He made her an example of what happens to wives who disobey their husbands. He said that men must be masters in their own house. But having removed her he was left without a queen. He felt her absence more acutely after his return from the war against Greece. He returned defeated. But his anger against Vashti had passed and he remembered her. Was he thinking of calling her back? The laws of the Medes and Persians would not allow this. His lawyers came and advised him as before to find a better woman to replace Vashti.

Beauty Contest

How does a king choose a wife? He holds a beauty contest. King Xerxes had his officers bring in beautiful virgins from all over his empire. The numbers are not given but there would have been many. According to Josephus there is evidence that 400 girls were brought. They were taken into the women's quarters or harem and put under the oversight of the eunuch Hegai. His job was to make these girls as beautiful as possible before being judged by the king. The winner would become the next queen of Persia. Was all this a horror for these girls as one commentator writes? Granted neither they nor their fathers had any choice in the matter, but the prize was attractive.

Among these beautiful young virgins was an orphaned Jewish girl called Hadassah. Growing up without a mother did not detract from her femininity it seems. In the providence of God she was noticed and taken to the palace. Her Persian name was Esther, a name derived from the Persian word for 'star'; although some connect it with the Babylonian goddess Ishtar. Esther was a lovely and beautiful young woman even before she received the king's beauty treatments. She was a credit to her adopted father Mordecai, who was in fact her cousin.

Mordecai was a Jew living in the palace city of Susa. A cuneiform tablet unearthed near Babylon contains the name Mardukaya, the name of a man who was an accountant or official in Susa in the time of Xerxes. Some think this man was Mordecai. They think the name Mordecai is linked to the Babylonian god Marduk. But the context in which his name is introduced in this chapter suggests it is a Jewish name (2:5). Moreover the name (not the same man) occurs in the list of exiles in Ezra 2:2 in the context of other Jewish names.

Mordecai's presence at the king's gate (2:21) suggests he had some sort of job in the public service. Much of the king's business was transacted at the gate. Mordecai was also there to keep an eye on Esther. He could get messages to and from her through contacts at the king's gate.

In keeping with the writer of the Chronicles, and of Ezra and Nehemiah, a brief genealogy is given for Mordecai. He was from the tribe of Benjamin, a tribe that was famous for providing Israel's first king. In fact Saul's father was Kish, probably an ancestor of Mordecai's great grandfather also called Kish. Being a relation of King Saul has implications in the dispute which Haman the Agagite had with Mordecai – but more of this next time.

Esther is sometimes compared, albeit unfavourably, with Daniel who was also an exile taken into the royal palace. Unlike Daniel who determined not to defile himself with food from the king's table, Esther appears to have accepted whatever she was given (2:9 – where portions is

understood as food). In fact Esther determined not to reveal her Jewish roots (2:10). But this is hardly a fair comparison. Daniel was brought to the palace precisely because he was a Jewish boy. Esther was brought because she was a beautiful virgin. Besides, it was not easy for a circumcised Jewish boy to conceal his identity.

Esther like Daniel found favour in the eyes of her supervisor in the palace. Hegai liked Esther and gave her special treatment. He provided her with seven of the best maids in the palace. He gave her the best rooms in the house of women (2:9). Esther was beautiful and gracious but no doubt uninformed in matters of cosmetics and make-up. Clearly the Lord God was watching over her as she entered into the palace and out of the care of Mordecai.

Esther was given beauty treatments for a full year. A special diet would have been on her menu as already mentioned. But the focus was on cosmetics and beauty treatments. In the first six months it was oil of myrrh and for the rest of the year it was other perfumes and preparations (2:12). After completing the twelve month beauty course she was ready to be presented to the king. Esther, like the other girls was allowed to choose her own perfumes and dress for this big occasion, but she let Hegai choose for her.

When her turn came Esther was taken to the king who was looking for a new wife (2:15). Esther won the favour of Hegai. She won the favour of all who saw her. Would she win the favour of the King of Persia? Yes! The king loved Esther more than any of the other women he saw (2:17). He married her and she became queen of Persia in place of Vashti whom he had removed for insubordination four years earlier. So much for the romance of this story.

The wedding was of course marked by a great feast, the feast of Esther (2:18). This would have gone on for at least a week like the previous one (1:5). Xerxes also proclaimed a holiday throughout his empire to celebrate the crowning of his new queen. The word 'holiday' means 'release' in Hebrew – as found in the KJV. Some suggest there was an amnesty for prisoners or a release from taxes.

The king also gave out lavish gifts according to oriental custom. This reminds me of India where I had to remember to give sweets to everyone I knew on my birthday. Sometimes people I did not know came around looking for their gift!

Mordecai's Report

As queen of Persia Esther was no longer dependant on her cousin and adopted father Mordecai. She was now married and in a much more influential position than Mordecai. He could not visit her or she him. He had to operate incognito for she did not tell any about her family (2:20). We might have expected Mordecai to fade out of the picture. But still she listened to him and honoured him as her father. Mordecai appears to have been at the king's gate almost every day waiting for news about Esther or from her.

It was while sitting in the gate that Mordecai overheard two servants plotting to assassinate the king. When was this? We read *in those days* (2:21). But prior to this there is a reference to when *virgins were gathered together a second time* (2:19). It is hard to know what this refers to. Why were virgins gathered a second time? Were they latecomers or was it another search for concubines.

In spite of this uncertainty the main point of these closing verses is clear. Mordecai heard of this conspiracy and through Esther reported it to the king. When the king had the matter investigated Mordecai's report was found to be correct and the two servants were hanged on a gallows (2:23).

Why these two were furious with the king is not recorded. Some suggest they were acting on behalf of Vashti but it seems to have been a more personal matter. Xerxes was eventually assassinated but this time Mordecai saved him. He had the inquiry and the outcome recorded in the book of the chronicles – it was written there in the presence of the king. But Mordecai was not given a reward for reporting this conspiracy even though his name was recorded (6:2).

Conclusion

In this chapter we are introduced to two Jews living in relative obscurity in Susa, far from their homeland of Judea. Esther lost both her father and mother while a child. Her older cousin called Mordecai graciously took her in and raised her as his own daughter. He taught her about her people and her family and no doubt about the God of her people also. But at the same time he told her to keep all this a secret.

How should we regard secret believers like Esther and Mordecai? There are many secret believers today. Many believers live in fear of losing their inheritance, their family or their life if they make it known that they believe in Jesus Christ. Should we condemn this failure to confess the name of Christ? Should we not declare the name of Christ and be ready to face the consequences? Should we take each case individually? To be afraid of losing one's inheritance hardly compares with losing one's life.

Turning to the Bible we find the place where Jesus said *whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 10:33). Secrecy cannot include denial. Before judging those who live in fear of prison or death, let us consider the many who deny Jesus by the way they live, without facing the threat of deprivation or death because of their faith.

God in his providence worked all things together for good to make Esther queen of Persia. He did this for his own sovereign purpose. He used the gentle spirit and outward beauty of Esther for this purpose. He made Hegai favourable towards her. He made the king favourable towards her.

God can still use the natural talents and abilities of his people to achieve his purposes. Missionaries often realise this only after they are taken by God to a certain place. God still overrules in the affairs of men, and in the hearts of men, even men in high places, to bring about his own purposes. Are you ready to be used by God for his purposes?

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