

Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church
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DHW
BIBLE STUDY CLASS

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

LESSON 2

INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins with the banishment of Vashti, the former queen of Persia, and the effect it had on King Ahasuerus. The position of the queen was vacant for some time. The present study shows a plan to fill the position of the queen of Persia. In the process of finding a woman to fill the position, the names of two Jews are introduced. They were Mordecai, an elderly Jew, and his very young cousin, Esther, who was an orphan and whom he raised up as his daughter. They were among the many descendants of the generation of Jews, who were taken captive in 586 B.C. from Judah to Babylon. When Cyrus the Great ascended the throne and became the king of the vast Medo-Persia Empire in 539 B.C., he, three years later, issued a decree permitting these Jews to return to their homeland and giving them religious freedom to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem and to worship the LORD

God.¹ Forty-nine thousand eight hundred and ninety-seven Jews returned to Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 2:64, 65). The events in Esther took place about fifty years later (483 B.C.).

Many Jews had opted not to return to Jerusalem, and among them were Mordecai and Esther, who are introduced for the first time in this chapter. Young Esther is the main character. The book of Esther is about her and the role she played in the deliverance of the Jewish people. In this chapter we learn how Esther became queen of Persia. It is interesting to note that Jews, who were generally known for their restraint in mingling and marrying people of other ethnic and religious kind, would live and work very closely and intimately with them. There seems to be almost no difference in the way the two groups, the remaining Jews in Persia and the uncircumcised Gentiles lived. Mordecai and Esther could actually typify the ordinary Jews, men

¹ Ezra 1:1 Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and *put it* also in writing, saying, 2 Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, The LORD God of heaven hath given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he hath charged me to build him an house at Jerusalem, which *is* in Judah. 3 Who *is there* among you of all his people? his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which *is* in Judah, and build the house of the LORD God of Israel, (he *is* the God,) which *is* in Jerusalem. 4 And whosoever remaineth in any place where he sojourneth, let the men of his place help him with silver, and with gold, and with goods, and with beasts, beside the freewill offering for the house of God that *is* in Jerusalem.

and women, who lived in various parts of the Medo-Persia Empire.

Nevertheless, we shall see the unseen providential hand of God working in the lives of these men and women to accomplish His will and plan on behalf of His chosen people. God's faithfulness to His covenant promise to the nation Israel is a great comfort and assurance for Christians who wholly trust in Him for their salvation from the fires of hell and a blessed place in heaven. The chapter can be divided into the following sections:

- 1) The king misses Vashti (2:1-4),
- 2) Esther under the charge of Mordecai (2:5-7),
- 3) Esther is favoured by Hegai (2:8-11),
- 4) Esther is crowned queen (2:12-20),
- 5) Esther informs the king of an assassination plot on him (2:21-23).

STUDY THE WORD

The King Misses Vashti (2:1-4)

The chapter begins with the phrase, *after these things*, indicating that some time had passed. It was probably three years when Ahasuerus returned from his campaign against Greece (479 B.C.). And by that time the king's anger against Vashti had cooled off, he remembered her. We can safely read between the lines that Ahasuerus probably recalled Vashti's refusal to comply with his request, and his decision to banish her on the advice of his

counsellors. It is evident that Ahasuerus was becoming restless and increasingly unhappy. According to the Persian law, it was not possible to reinstate Vashti. Immediately, the king's personal servants sprang into action for fear of any reprisal against them. They proposed a plan to seek *fair, young virgins* throughout the empire, and that they be brought before the king. Three criteria deemed the women qualified for the selection. They had to be *fair* which means extraordinarily beautiful and compliant, *young* and unmarried. No other qualities, for example, intelligence, which were more important to the king were required.

The method of gathering these women were unlike today's beauty pageant. There were no preliminary contests at provincial level and then selected for a final contest before the king. The gathering of these women was by order of the king. The recruitment of these *fair, young virgins* was compulsory. These women might not be able to refuse. It was not a competition. When these women were brought to the palace in Shushan, they would not be presented straightaway to the king. They must undergo a treatment of beautification under Hegai, who knew how best to prepare the women for that one special evening with the king. Hegai was the chief eunuch of the king's harem in charge of looking after the women. And when the time came for these *fair, young virgins* to appear before the king, the lady who *pleaseth* the king most would become queen in the place of Vashti. Apparently, the king was delighted with

the plan and he gave his approval. His earlier memory of regrets disappeared at the anticipated enjoyment of a new beautiful woman.

Esther Under the Charge of Mordecai (2:5-7)

The divine writer suddenly introduces Mordecai and Esther for the first time. Mordecai is introduced as being *in Shushan the palace* (v.5) suggesting that he held some kind of a position in government. He was a Jew although his name was not Jewish. The name *Mordecai* was Babylonian because *Marduka* was the name of a Babylonian god. But that is not to say that he was a worshipper of the Babylonian god.² However, it is a fact that he did not take the opportunity to leave with the others under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem. He would rather remain in Shushan. He was the son of Jair, who was the son of Shimei, who was the son of Kish, a Benjamite. His great grandfather was taken captive by Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in 586 B.C. together with Jeconiah, who was the king of Judah. Mordecai had a cousin by the name of Esther, who was his uncle's daughter. Esther was an orphan and nothing is said about how her parents died when she was very young. Mordecai raised her up as his own daughter. Esther

² Daniel 1:6 Now among these were of the children of Judah, Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah: 7 Unto whom the prince of the eunuchs gave names: for he gave unto Daniel *the name* of Belteshazzar; and to Hananiah, of Shadrach; and to Mishael, of Meshach; and to Azariah, of Abednego.

(meaning *star*) whose Hebrew name was Hadassah (Hebrew meaning: *myrtle*) is introduced here as being *fair and beautiful* (2:7). She is described as *fair* (Hebrew: *yapheh*) because she had a beautiful figure; and *beautiful* (Hebrew: *towb*) because she had a good, pleasant and agreeable nature. We know from the account that Mordecai was much older than Esther for he was her guardian.

Esther is Favoured by Hegai (2:8-11)

In accordance with the king's edict, many young virgins were taken and gathered into the king's palace in Shushan. They were all placed under Hegai, the chief custodian of the king's concubines. Esther was one of the maidens who were taken and brought to Hegai. Esther right away won the favour of Hegai. She learned quickly how to survive in the new situation and the purpose for which she was brought there. Hegai took a special liking for her. He was kind to her. He wasted no time in giving her all the required perfumes and cosmetics for her beauty treatment, and assigned seven maids to attend and assist her. In addition, she and the seven maids were given the best quarters in *the house of the women* to live.

However, Esther had not revealed her Jewish ethnicity. The reason was because Mordecai had instructed her not to do so. Esther was faithfully loyal and obedient to Mordecai, trusting him that he knew what he was doing. No reason is given why Mordecai instructed Esther to conceal her ethnicity. Some Bible scholars suggested that there was a

growing anti-Jewish feeling. Esther is portrayed as an obedient young lady who listened to every advice of Mordecai. In this regard, both of them did not display that they were godly Jews. For one thing they did not return to Jerusalem to be among their own kind and to be near where the Temple was. They had taken Gentile names. They ate non-kosher food. Mordecai must have taken a significant part in having Esther taken to the palace for this selection by the king to be his wife and queen. The rewards might be attractive but the result of being rejected was equally great. The girl who was rejected would have to live for the rest of her life in the second harem of the king. If Mordecai was a god-fearing child of God, he should not have put Esther through such an experience. Mordecai made daily visit to *the court of the women's quarters* to find out how Esther was doing and what was to become of her. Esther either was chosen to become queen or be condemned to a "living death" in the king's harem to be summoned whenever the king wanted her or even remembered her.

Esther is Crowned Queen (2:12-20)

Every young virgin aspirant had one year of beauty treatment—for six months her body was treated with *oil of myrrh*, and the latter six months with perfume and other scented fragrance. When the period of beautification was over, each young maid would be presented to the king. She would be given whatever she needed or wanted to please the king that night. In other words,

she would stay overnight with the king to please him. She went in the evening and the next day she would return to *the second house of the women*, where she would live for the rest of her life. The eunuch in charge of this second harem was Shaashgaz (Persian meaning, *servant of the beautiful*). Those ladies who were sent to this second harem could only see or be with the king again if he was delighted with her and called her by name. How dangerous it was for Mordecai to make her cousin to take this risk. The chances of success were slim indeed. She would unlikely have a second chance. Mordecai really exploited her for his own promotional prospect. He is portrayed as a person who was covetously ambitious in the wrong way. He had subjected Esther to a night's stand with the king and if she was not chosen, she would live the rest of her life in the second harem, where she could not meet another man and be married!

The time for Esther's turn to appear before the king had come. Her father's name was given here as Abihail (Hebrew, meaning: *my father is might*) who was the uncle of Mordecai. Esther did not ask for any thing except what Hegai gave to her. She trusted Hegai who definitely would know the likes and dislikes of Ahasuerus. She was humble and cooperative. In this regard, Esther was observant and wise. It is also mentioned that Esther was liked by all who *looked upon her*. That tells a lot about Esther. She was not only beautiful but she was also pleasant in character and conduct. Esther went to the royal house

of King Ahasuerus in the month of Tebeth (the tenth month of the Jewish calendar) in the seventh year of his reign (479 B.C.).

Esther charmed the heart of King Ahasuerus. The king loved Esther above all the other young virgins. She obtained grace and favour even in the sight of all the other young women. The king chose her and crowned her with the royal crown which was worn by Vashti. Esther was made queen in the place of Vashti. This was a great success for Esther and Mordecai. She survived the danger of being condemned to the second harem. Mordecai would be expecting another promotion. King Ahasuerus made a great feast to celebrate the coronation of Esther as queen. He even called the banquet *Esther's Feast*. The king *made a release* (v.17), which means that he cancelled certain taxes for the whole nation. He also gave gifts to express his pleasure to his subjects. It was truly a happy day for all the people. One can expect and imagine that nothing was overlooked in making a stupendous and memorable occasion. A lot of money would have been spent on the facilities, decorations, clothing and feasting. The dignitaries from all the provinces would be invited to this coronation. One can be certain that nothing was left undone. Verse 19 seems to be difficult to understand. But this writer thinks that the second gathering of the virgins who were Esther's fellow "contestants" in this round were allowed to join in the celebration before they were permanently confined to the second harem. Mordecai

is mentioned again. This time he was said to be sitting *in the king's gate* (v.19). This means that he was now made an officer in the king's administrative arm. He was promoted.

Esther becoming queen was by the providence of God for a purpose which is not yet revealed at this point. This honour Esther did not seek. She was obedient to Mordecai and resigned to the prospect of being permanently incarcerated in the second harem. She was indeed young and obedient. She and Mordecai did not know what grave danger lay in the days ahead. Esther could have been somewhat spiritual. She might not be a pious Jew in her daily living, but she still acknowledged that the LORD was her God. She displayed this part of her character and conduct later on when she faced a very difficult and precarious situation later in time.

Esther Informs the King of an Assassination Plot on Him (2:21-23)

Mordecai was now seated *in the king's gate*—the administration department of the king's government. One day while Mordecai was there, two of the king's *chamberlains* were plotting to assassinate the king. Their names were Bigthan (meaning: *in their wine press*) and Teresh (meaning: *strictness*). These two were not among the seven eunuchs who were named earlier. They were probably the king's most trusted eunuchs who stood guard at the king's private apartment. This made their treason doubly serious and dangerous. They were *wroth*. The word *wroth* (Hebrew:

qasap) is a term expressing a burning consuming anger. The reason for their intense anger is not stated. This conspiracy to kill the king was known to Mordecai. How he came to know is not told. He could have overheard it himself or someone must have informed him. Mordecai promptly reported to Queen Esther, and probably instructed her to report to the king. Esther told the king and the matter was registered in the name of Mordecai as a good patriot. An investigation was conducted. The matter was found to be true. The two guards were *hanged on a tree*. It was recorded in the king's book of chronicles. There was no reward given to Mordecai who could have anxiously expected it—maybe another promotion. But it did not happen; he waited in vain. However, this patriotic action on his part is going to serve him well at a later time, according to God's timing.

PRACTICAL VALUE

The inclusion of Mordecai's report of an assassination attempt against the king seems to be out of place with the preceding flow of events. But in God's providential plan and purpose, this seemingly unrelated event would be used to fulfil His will at the right time. Mordecai did a good thing. We learn that every good thing that we do, small or great, will ultimately be rewarded. God knows what His children do and their good works will be rewarded in His appointed time. We also learn that we must act responsibly in our daily life. Another example is Joseph who served Pharaoh of Egypt. So was Daniel who

served the king of Babylon. We also learn that anger is self-defeating. It happened to Ahasuerus whose anger cost his most beautiful wife. Bigthan and Teresth paid with their lives. Do not take revenge. Let God judge and execute the vengeance.

Mordecai and Esther are not good examples for us. We do not participate in the kind of beauty contest which they did. For want of fame, wealth, power, and a life of ease, Mordecai exploited his cousin Esther into doing something that is shameful—sleeping with a Gentile king for one night with the risk of being rejected and permanently incarcerated. We must not exploit our innocent young children in this manner. Mordecai could have hidden Esther when the officials came round to gather eligible young virgins. Instead he encouraged his cousin.

Esther appeared to be young and innocent. But she displayed a disposition that is exemplary. She was faithful and completely obedient to her guardian. She submitted to him implicitly. She was liked by Hegai because she was humble and cooperative. However, we cannot approve of her one night stand with the king hoping to become queen. That kind of action is deplorable and we must resist. Other than that Esther is a great young woman. We will learn that in spite of man's failures, God can use them to fulfil His purpose for His own glory and honour. But should this encourage us to be careless and do what is right in our eyes believing that God can still use us? Nothing of the kind! We must live according to God's Word. Whether He uses us or not and no matter what, is His prerogative. But we can be sure that we will bear the penalty and consequences of sins.

AMEN