

ESTHER 5

THE LORD GRANTS ESTHER ACCESS TO THE KING OF PERSIA

In chapter 4 we saw Mordechai hastening away to prepare the three-day fast of the Jews in support of Esther's promise to go to the king of Persia. Esther and her maid-servants fasted also, in order to bring before the LORD Esther's coming attempt to save her people. In this chapter we read, then, how Esther goes to the king to make her request to him.

We may safely conclude that during the time of the fasting, Esther has given the whole matter much prayerful thought. We will see how this is evident in this chapter, and, in time, also in the next chapter. Fools rush in. What we learn right away already is that God's children do not rush into potentially dangerous situations without prayer or preparation. First think about it carefully. What is the best way to deal with this matter? Faith and logic do not cancel each other out, but we must reason carefully and prayerfully as we seek the best way to go. Not that we can ever have all the angles covered, so to speak, but a logical approach is important in problem-solving.

IMPORTANT QUESTIONS

Esther's approach does lead us to ask certain questions. The first question is: why does she *delay* in making her request known to the king? In chapter 5 we twice read the statement of the king: What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom it will be given you. Now the king's formulation ("even up to half the kingdom") should not be taken literally, perhaps more as a royal way of speaking, (somewhat pompous, I'd say) but it does show that Esther had the king's favour. Why delay then?

The second question is: why did she also include Haman in her invitation to the banquet? Was this strictly necessary? Could this not have back-fired? Haman was the second most powerful man in the empire, and he might be able to persuade the king that *his* request should still be granted, and that, perhaps by way of exception, Esther's life be spared.

LITERARY TECHNIQUE?

Some (modern) explainers see in the chapters 5 and 6 a much-used literary technique, namely to increase the suspense in a story through a delaying tactic or a stalling mechanism. The writer wants to keep us spell-bound, and by delaying

Esther's request, heightens the tension. But this is not a story, although, I'm sure, it has literary aspects. This is the history of redemption, and therefore we should not speak of a "literary technique" in this respect. Esther certainly has reasons to postpone her actual request, but the writing itself is true to the factual account. This is fact, not fiction. So we will have to examine Esther's motives, as far as the text allows, and we must maintain that the written text is accurate.

This is the true account of the sovereign God of heaven and earth who in his grace sets out to deliver his people. We see in this chapter how the LORD shows his sovereign grace to Israel by granting Esther access to the king of Persia to plead for her people. We will see Esther's courage, Esther's caution, and Esther's comfort.

Now Esther's name figures prominently in the above-mentioned three points. But remember that behind Esther stands the Triune God, the living God, the covenant God of Israel. He gives the courage, the caution, and the comfort. When we speak about Esther, we speak about her indeed as a daughter of Zion, a woman who trusts in the LORD, and is guided by him. But that does not do away with her own responsibility and activity.

GOD-GIVEN COURAGE

And then we may say: you have to admire her courage which the LORD gives her and with which she may work. It says in verse 1: on the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. We also learn that the king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. This means that from where the king is sitting, he can look into the courtyard beyond, and observe whoever comes in.

Now it may have been that the king was at this time holding court, receiving reports and emissaries, making judgments, and determining policy. This is sometimes -even for a great emperor- a rather boring duty. These emissaries officially presented themselves via the secretary of the king, and were then told whether they could come in or not.

Esther's sudden presence in the courtyard facing the king is then in a sense an intrusion. If it is true that the king is conducting important matters of state, he has no time now for his wife with whatever domestic problem she may have. But she comes into the courtyard, clearly visible to the king, and we can understand that her heart is beating rapidly, for this is the key moment: if I perish, I perish! She does display deep courage here.

QUEEN BY THE GRACE OF GOD

Notice the annotation in verse 1 that "Esther put on her royal robes". This is an important action on Esther's part. She comes in her official capacity and status as Queen of Persia. No one else may wear these royal robes made only for Persia's queen. The putting on of the royal robes also shows that she has come to

do official business, which impacts on the king and his empire. When the queen comes in full royal regalia, she is requesting an important audience with the king. This is a clear sign to the king, but Esther cannot know ahead of time how he will take this. Will he be bothered by her boldness or be impressed with her courage?

What a contrast with the former queen Vashti! She was summoned, but refused to come. Esther was not called, but came on her own. And from a human standpoint she is taking a bigger risk than Vashti. If the king is not favourable toward her, even angered at her audacity, he may reject her altogether, and it would be like a sentence of death. Vashti, at least, was not executed.

What will have to decide the moment? I am sure that Esther has put on the required make-up. She is presented in her finest robes and looking simply gorgeous. Remember that she was an extra-ordinarily beautiful woman, with a warm and sincere personality. Is this going to sway the king to make a positive gesture? We know better than that. The writer may also at this point not mention the LORD's Name -for has God not in judgment hidden himself from Israel?- but we cannot escape the sense that the LORD is very much present at this precise moment!

Esther stands there in her beauty with royal regalia, but she also stands there in her weakness as a woman. It may seem that she is queen by the grace of Xerxes, for her very presence can mean her death. But we know better. She is "Regina Dei Gratia", queen by the grace of God! If Esther did not believe that, she wouldn't be standing there in her royal robes.

If she wanted to seduce the king with sexual favours, as perhaps others would have done, she'd wear a different outfit, but she comes to the king as his queen, showing the courage that a true queen does have when it comes to the safety of her people! The king has many concubines and living Barbie dolls, but he has only one queen! Esther displays the courage that a queen must have in whatever involvement she takes in the affairs of state.

COURAGE

"Courage" is displayed by many people under certain dangerous circumstances. Courage is not a virtue which only Christians have. Yet here it does have a special significance. Because it takes real courage to defend the cause of God's people! Just as later it will take great courage to take up the cause of the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ, to tackle an entire empire, to be witnesses of Christ in word and deed in a world that spits you out. The world will never support this cause. There are certainly times when God restrains evil, holds back the lawless one, so that the church may be gathered and the Gospel preached (cf. 2 Thess 2). But Jesus also said: if they have hated me, they will hate you (John 15: 18-20). Even if you give no cause. They will hate you because they know who you are! Even a woman's beauty will not protect her.

It is only by God's sovereign grace, that we will be able to stand in the last

days as church of the Lord Jesus, expecting his appearing in glory. In a time of advent courage from above is needed. The courage to be a Christian. The courage to live and act as a Christian, to speak up when the existence of the church is threatened. To take up the cause of Christ, of the truth that truly sets people free.

This courage demonstrated here at such a key historic moment, must be shown by us in our daily life. We cannot all be queen or king for a day. But we are all prophets, priests, and kings every day in our capacity, our office and calling, as believers. We must confess Christ truly, offer ourselves thankfully in God's service, and fight against sin and evil, in our life and in society, especially in a world where God's Name is never used, except as a curse. When you look at what is happening in the world today, and when the persecution of the Christian church is at an unprecedented high, you know that it takes a lot of courage in some places to stand up and say simply: I am a Christian!

We learn that we may use the positions and privileges which the LORD gives us, also in secular life. Use them for the benefit of his church, for the coming of his kingdom. That indeed takes courage. I know that this is an important part of the schools' curriculum: teach the youth to stand up and be counted as Christians, to encourage them to act as covenant children. Our youth -as well as all older members- need that courage. Without becoming militant crusaders, always within the confines of the law, we need to exercise our Christian duty for the defense of God's people everywhere and the gathering and preservation of his church.

CAUTION

This also requires *caution*. You need to follow a sound plan. I find it to be an important aspect of the book of Esther that great courage does not do away with careful caution. Think about what your purpose is, what your calling is, and then consider the steps that should be taken to achieve your goal. You have to learn to think from a Christian perspective: what is the best course to follow? How can I do what I may really ask the LORD to bless?

Caution is required in so many things in life. Think before you speak. Reflect before you act. This is true in your own family, and also in the church. Exercise caution. Show wisdom. The book of Esther as part of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament tells us how to deal wisely in difficult times without ever compromising our principles. Caution is needed always.

This caution is required especially when you are dealing with enemies of God's people. For they will twist your words, make your motives seem suspicious, and blacken your reputation. We cannot always prevent this from happening, but it should render us cautious, as the Lord Jesus said -and we quoted already earlier: be wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

Without being conspiratorial, you need a plan from which you may expect results. You have to realize also that not every plan works, for in his heart a man

plans his course, but God determines his steps (Prov 16: 19). It is no shame if a plan does not work. Then we go back to the drawing board to see what is perhaps better, or where our plan was faulty. The wisdom literature of Israel (especially Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes) always speak highly of caution or prudence, having an open and honest approach that is at the same time a wise and balanced approach. This is not a matter of pragmatism, but of wisdom.

PROPER TIME AND PROCEDURE

Esther obviously has a plan. When the king asks her: what is your request? she does not immediately fall to pieces and blurt out her problem: you have conspired with Haman to kill the Jews and I also am Jewish! That would have put the king, to say the least, on the defensive, and it may have angered him: his sudden rage is legendary.

One of the explainers correctly here points to Ecclesiastes 8. You should read this chapter when you have some time. Let us look at Ecclesiastes 8: 5 and 6: Whoever obeys his [the king's] command will come to no harm, and the wise heart will know the proper time and procedure. Do you see those words? Notice then what follows in verse 6: for there is a proper time and procedure for every matter, though a man's misery weighs heavily upon him.

These words can be applied directly to Esther. A woman of wisdom. A woman of caution. There is a proper time and procedure. Even when your misery weighs heavily upon you. How did she fear for her people and her own life! Be cautious, and do not let your anxiety lead to rash decisions. Commit your cause to the LORD. Know whom you are dealing with. Wait for the right moment to speak, and then do so carefully.

WHY A BANQUET?

We understand how Esther's upbringing in the wisdom of God benefits her. At this first audience, the time for her request is not yet proper. She does not stall, or use mean tactics, but simply says (verse 4): if it pleases the king (notice the polite address to royalty), let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet that I have prepared for him.

Why a banquet? Because the king loves to be entertained. He usually invites others to a banquet, but is seldom spontaneously invited himself. But the queen invites him. He really likes this, and why shouldn't he? It's a wonderful gesture, typical of Esther's kindness and caring.

She adds: together with Haman! This may surprise us at first. Why invite the enemy in? The king does not yet know he's an enemy, and after all Haman is Prime Minister, so the king can discuss with Haman important matters of state. Esther does not want to take up the king's time exclusively; someone like Haman might be an interesting man to invite also.

Notice that there is some pressure applied by Esther. Come today. Actually, the banquet is already prepared. Come *now*. It's like she presents it as a special surprise. No frozen micro-wave meal today, but a real banquet, steaming hot. And the king likes it! Verse 5: bring Haman at once! Haman is immediately summoned. Esther's position is in fact higher than that of Haman. He is Prime Minister, but she is the Queen!

THE KING IS NO FOOL

I presume that Haman is caught completely by surprise. He is probably as nervous as Esther. What? A banquet with the king *and* queen? Now? Right away? What shall I wear? Can there be anything behind this? A promotion of another singular honour?

The king enjoys himself immensely. During this banquet, or rather after the banquet, as they were drinking wine, the king asks Esther (verse 6): now what is your petition? Your request? It will be granted! This king is no fool. He understands perfectly well that Esther is leading up to something. He knows the risk she took in approaching him. There's something behind all this, and he wants to know. He is in a good mood and, perhaps light-heartedly, repeats his willingness to grant her request. But he has to know what it is.

Yet still Esther is not ready. She says, verse 7: let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question! The king is right. There is a specific request. But let it wait one more day. Then she will make it known. And this indeed functions to whet the king's appetite. He agrees, and probably with some growing respect. This woman knows what she is doing. And he leaves, wondering what it could possibly be that Esther wants. The mystery must be made known; not knowing is unbearable. The king agrees to come to the banquet the next day. He is in good spirits, and so is Haman.

REALITY CHECK

Then there is in this chapter and the next one in a sense a sudden reality check. From the pleasant intimacy of a royal banquet, tea for three, we go to the noise and bustle of the king's gate. Chapter 5 brings us back to the scheming politics of the day. How Haman boasts and brags about his close fellowship with the king and queen, and the singular honour of being invited to the banquet the next day. Things look good from that angle. But he is now even more offended at Mordechai's refusal to honour him. Haman dines with the king and he queen, but this cursed Jew will not pay him proper homage. Haman is obsessed with his own pride and rage. Something must be done against Mordechai. And upon the advice of his wife and friend he has a gallows erected for Mordechai's execution.

The king himself, we read in chapter 6: 1, has a sleepless night. This, too, is not accidental, but shows us again the providence of the LORD. Perhaps Xerxes

was thinking about the banquet of the next day, wondering what Esther's request could possibly be. To pass the time, he has his attendants read from the chronicles of his reign. It so happens that the record of Mordechai's feats is read. We see God's sovereign grace again emerging over Israel. Nothing happens by chance, for God is in total control.

And Esther is greatly comforted. She cannot but be encouraged as she prepares for the hour of truth. She did not yet lose her life. She did find favour with the king. The scene is carefully set to disclose the need of her people and herself. The trap is set. Haman will be accused directly. Esther's words will be simple and to the point! That's the language which has the greatest effect. No more delay. No fancy footwork. Tomorrow the time is there and the procedure is in place. A wise heart knows the time and procedure, and Esther is comforted indeed.

ESTHER ENCOURAGED

As Haman brags to his wife and friends, and the king has a restless night, Esther is at peace with the LORD. The latter is not expressly mentioned. But as Haman and the king encounter problems, Esther does not have any difficulties that need to be reported. Everything is in place. She has done what she could. Tomorrow she will plead the cause of her people. Is she nervous? Who would not be nervous in her situation? But she is also comforted. For in the covenant there is a deep wisdom: the LORD who has helped us thus far, will help us farther. Ebenezer. She could have already been executed; but now she is truly comforted. Her moment will come, and God will bless.

Although not named here, he is at the heart of this history. This is not a tale of human heroics, but of sovereign grace, of God who keeps his promises toward those who fear him. In Proverbs 21 we read: the king's heart is in the hand of the LORD; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases. It is also said in the wisdom of God: wickedness will not release those who practice it (Ecclesiastes 8: 8). Haman will go under to his own evil schemes. He who digs a pit for another, falls into it himself.

Haman the Agagite has forgotten all that has happened in the history of his people. Esther has not forgotten what God has done for Israel, and she knows that his promises stand and are fulfilled in a wondrous way. She knows the song: O God, our help in ages past, our hope for years to come (Hymn 42: 8, *Book of Praise*).

SLEEPING BEAUTY

When you have done all you can, have humbly made your plans in the fear of the LORD, and set out your course in faith and trust, you are comforted. So it is in many aspects of our lives. If we plan and act in faith, in accordance with God's Word, we need not worry, toss and turn, have contingency plans for all kinds of eventualities. Then we may leave things in the LORD's hand. Stop sec-

ond-guessing ourselves, because we'll either fall into self-justification or be dominated by fear. Leave the outcome to the LORD, and what he gives is often beyond our wildest hopes and dreams!

For the LORD has a plan to deliver his people, from more than earthly powers, indeed, from the power of sin and death. Haman cannot stand in God's way. The king of Persia must serve the royal decree of God. This is their only function: the LORD uses them to further the cause of his people, to pave the way for the kingdom of God and of his Anointed, Jesus Christ, who secures the salvation of all who call upon him truly.

There are three people going into the night before the banquet. Haman tosses and turns, angrily planning the execution of Mordechai. The king is restless, as kings can be, and they read stories to him. Not just any story, for it happens to be about the bravery of Mordechai. God book-marked the page. And Esther? Sleeping beauty. Tomorrow is the big day; this night she may rest. Thee do I as my refuge treasure: I will lie down and sleep in peace (Psalm 4: 4, *Book of Praise*).

When the dawn comes, all things will be made new.