

“GREAT WOMEN OF THE BIBLE -- QUEEN ESTHER”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Esther 1:1-10:3

If you have ever doubted that “Truth is stranger than fiction” a thoughtful reading of the book of Esther will dispel such doubt. Set in the sumptuous surroundings of a Persian palace, the story develops incident by incident, until a climax of difficulty is reached. Just when the knot of personal and political intrigue is so tightly tied that escape seems impossible, with wonderful dexterity the loving father unravels the human tangle, bringing order out of chaos and triumph out of what seems to be certain defeat.

Few stories are so rich in romance and drama as this one. Against an exotic backdrop of oriental splendor which staggers the imagination, five fascinating figures live out a tale which includes love, intrigue, hatred, revenge, lust, suspense and triumphant.

The Characters

The first character to appear on the pages of Queen Esther is A-has-u-e'-rus, a cruel, sensual and fickle king known outside the Bible by his Greek name Xerxes. Both Biblical and secular history reveal him to be one of the most voluptuous and despotic rulers of all time.

Vashti

Vashti, his beautiful wife who refuses the King's cruel request, is the second main character to appear on the pages of this tale of intrigue. Her tenure is a brief one, but she lives her role with such fidelity that she earns our undying respect.

The “No!” -- with which she responds to the King's cruel and wicked order is one of the “great-inspired ‘No’s’ of all history.” And while Vashti is world-famed for her beauty, she lives on in history, not because of the symmetry of her face and figure, but because of the flawless beauty of her character.

Haman

The third of these five fascinating figures is Haman, a courier, who is much in favor with the King. Someone has characterized him as a little man in a big jog. He is proud, egotistical, vain and versed in the art of flattery. But the real key to his character is seen in his intense hatred for the Jews. As a matter of fact, his suggestion that every Jew in the Persian empire be slain was the beginning of anti-Semitism on a significant scale. And, the only thing that differentiates Haman from Hitler is that Hitler did what Haman would have done had not divine providence intervened.

Mordecai

Mordecai, an old Jew who hold a minor office in the palace, is the fourth figure of significance in our story. He is a man of strong character and convictions. An ardent patriot who grows in importance as the story unfolds.

Esther

The key character, of course, is Esther herself. All that we know about this exiled Jewish girl who became the Queen of Persia is taken from the Bible itself.

We know that the death of her parents left her an orphan in early life, and that Mordecai, her cousin, took her into his household and raised her as his own daughter.

Under his loving care and tutelage, she grows into a surpassingly beautiful young woman, whose real beauty, is not external, but, as is always the case, comes from within. There are many beautiful women who are not physically pretty, and there are many physically pretty women who are not beautiful. But, when perfection of face and form unite with the pure fire of an inner loveliness, then the possessor of such character and charm is equipped to be singularly effective in molding the affairs of man.

Queen Esther is one these rare souls. What she does and how she does it is the theme of ten fascinating chapters which make up the book bearing her name.

The Story

The story opens in all the oriental splendor of an Arabian nights tale. For 180 days, or 6 months, Xerxes has been conducting a lavish festival for the princes of his empire. It is an affair which rivals anything mankind has ever known for wickedness and beauty, lasciviousness and splendor.

Flanked by 127 princes, all gloriously arrayed in garments of gold and fine linen, their jeweled rings and gem studded tiaras flashing in the light of a vast candelabra which hangs from the ceiling. Xerxes, or Ahasuerus Ashhe is known in the Bible, spares no expense to make this an occasion to remember.

To house the crowd of guests, he has had built, in the palace grounds, a temporary palace with pillars of gold and silver and marble. Hanging from the ceiling and walls are curtains and draperies of purple and white and blue and green. The couches on which the guests recline are of gold and silver, and the drinking cups are also gold, encrusted with jewels.

From the minstrel galleries float down the strains of some sensual music and on a central platform dancing girls while beguiling in an oriental dance.

As the feast wears on, Ahasuerus strains his perverse imagination for the ways in which to entertain his guest who by now are nearly overcome with liquor and fatigue. Suddenly his alcohol-inflamed brain conceives the idea of parading Vashti, his wife and the most beautiful woman in the world, before the lustful gaze of his drunken friends.

To her eternal credit Vashti refuses. Knowing that to reject the command of a king, however unjust or wicked, is to risk dismissal from the court, exile perhaps, even death itself. Vashti, nonetheless, sends back a blunt refusal. Her beauty is her own and her husband, it is not for open show among hundreds of intoxicated men.

The king's infantile vanity cannot stand this rebuff, and in a fit of anger he strips Vashti of her crown and issues an order that her royal position is to be given to another.

Following a beauty contest which would make the Miss America Pageant look like a hill-billy hoedown, Esther is selected as the loveliest of the land and upon obtaining the favor of the king is made queen of the Persian empire.

At the time she is granted this honor, King Ahasuerus has no idea she is a Jewess. But, as the story moves forward with quickening pace, that fact coupled with his great love for her takes on tremendous importance.

Among the king's courtiers is a man called Haman. As I have said, he is a clever man, and through cunning and flattery has obtained a position of great prominence among the king's ministers. In fact, he is the second most powerful man in the kingdom, subject only to Xerxes himself.

As a sop to his insatiable ego, Haman orders everyone to do his reverence by genuflecting whenever he passes. And, thought it galls them, all the other courtiers and princes bow and scrape, all that is, but one . . . Mordecai.

So tender-skinned is Haman's vanity that this single, small slight by an insignificant old Jew assumes ridiculous proportions, he broods over this supposed insult, allowing it to fester and grow, feeding the hatred he already has for everything Jewish until nothing will satisfy him unless he exterminates not merely Mordecai, but his entire race.

He tells Ahasuerus that the non-conforming Jews scattered throughout his kingdom are a threat to the empire's well-being and that they should be done away with. The light and careless manner in which the king signs away the lives of tens of thousands of his subjects has been properly banned as

“Perhaps the most shocking example of oriental despotism on record.”

And, it may very well be the place where Adolph Hitler got a similar idea which actually resulted in the massacre of Jews.

When Mordecai learns of the plot, he puts on a sack cloth and ashes, an oriental symbol of mourning, and appears before Queen Esther, imploring her to go to the king and ask him to revoke the cruel edict.

She replies that the law of the palace prohibits anyone from appearing before the king without being invited by him. To do so means certain death.

Furthermore, she explains that there is the chance that she has lost favor with the king for she has not been with him for thirty days. This combined with the knowledge of his fickle and impetuous nature, and the memory of what had happened to Vashti causes Esther to refuse at first. She knows that the situation is fraught with danger.

It is then that Mordecai responds with an appeal that has nerved the arm and steadied the will of many of those whom God has used in wonderful ways ever since.

“Who knows but what you were brought to the kingdom for just such an hour as this.”

Here is an appeal Esther cannot dismiss. With a wisdom far beyond her years, for even at this juncture she is barely out of her teens, Esther realizes that all the events which have transpired to put her in this place of influence have not been the product of chance, but the result of God’s guiding hand.

On some other day, in some other place, some other person may have to risk his life for the safety of her people, but for this day, and in this place the responsibility is hers. And so she says,

“I will go in to the king even though it is not according to the law, and if I

perish, I perish.”

Quietly she asks all the Jews in the land to hold a fast in her behalf and she joins them in it. On the third day she puts on her royal apparel and stands near the gate of the king’s throne room where she will be certain to attract his attention.

As the king sits upon his throne, gazing past the marble pillars, he sees, with some surprise, the graceful figure of his young and beautiful wife.

It is a moment filled with suspense and peril. If Esther fails to please him, not only she, but her entire race, will die a violent and bloody death.

Ahasuerus studies her for a moment, and then sires a sense of relief within her as he extends the golden scepter, as a sign of his favor.

Esther slowly and majestically walks to the throne, receives the scepter, and takes her place beside the king. He then asks her what she wishes and promises to give her anything up to half his kingdom.

It is here that the queenly qualities of Esther come to the fore, for instead of focusing on those thirty days of indifference and falling on her knees and in relief, pouring out her request, Esther is much wiser. With remarkable restraint she simply invites the king, and Haman his prime minister, to dinner.

Following a splendid feast, the king repeats his offer to fulfill any request, and she responds that the only thing she wishes is that they return and feast with her again the following day.

Haman is so elated that being the only outsider attending this royal banquet, he rushes home and brags to his wife and friends about his new status in the kingdom.

They advise him that the time has finally come to move against Mordecai, and so he builds a scaffold upon which to hang him.

In the meantime, the king has returned to his home for some strange reason is unable to sleep. Perhaps he is suffering from indigestion, because of Esther's cooking.

But at any rate, to while away the hours, he asks for the daily record to be read and he hears how a few weeks earlier Mordecai had overthrown a plot to kill the king and had thus saved his life. When Xerxes learns that no recognition has been given Mordecai for his valor he calls Haman and asks what should be done for a man whom he wants to honor.

Thinking that the man could be none other than himself, Haman suggests that the honored person should be dressed in the king's apparel and ride upon the king's horses adorned with the royal crown and be escorted through the streets of the city by one of the king's most noble princes. Only then does Haman learn that the honor is to be conferred, not upon him, but upon his mortal enemy -- Mordecai. And, to add insult to injury, Haman is to lead the parade.

The following day, still sullen and stung by the humiliation of recent events, Haman returns to Esther's second feast. Cheered by the food and the gracious presence of his beautiful wife, Ahasuerus asks once more what request Esther would make. This time she responds with the full story and the king is shocked to learn she is pleading for her own life and for that of the Jewish people.

Stunned by the sudden introduction of stark tragedy into the middle of a joyous feast, Ahasuerus demands to know the name of the person who has plotted this terrible thing.

Lifting a jeweled hand, Esther points across the table to Haman. The king is torn between two actions now, and walks out into the garden to think. Having been found out, Haman throws

himself at the feet of the queen, begging for life. When the king returns he finds Haman clinging to Esther, and mistaking this for some kind of an amorous assault, in a fit of rage, orders Haman to be hanged on the very same gallows that had been prepared for Mordecai.

And so the story ends.

And, “truth being stranger than fiction” the tables are completely turned. Mordecai, who only moments before had been in mortal danger, is elevated to the place once held by Haman. While Haman and his offspring come to the same sad end, they had plotted for the Jews.

And Esther, the beautiful young queen who had conquered and almost insuperable temptation to look out for her own skin at the expense of her people, choosing rather the course of person danger and potential death, is raised to the pinnacle of prominence and becomes known to this very day as one of history’s true heroines.

The Application

Now there are several great lessons to be learned from this most interesting story.

First, When God Makes A Promise He keeps It.

Many millenniums ago, God promised Abraham that his seed would bless the earth, that Israel would be His chosen people, and that He would provide for them with special care,

“I will bless them that bless you and curse him that curse you.” (Gen. 12:3)

Throughout the centuries Haman after Haman has arisen to destroy the Jews. But God has always preserved them. Their oppressors have risen and ridden rampant for a time, only to ultimately fall and blow away like chaff before the wind.

The eternal Jew goes on from age to age as God keeps His promise not to let them be lost from the face of the earth.

Frederick the Great, once asked his chaplain for a single sentence which proved the existence of God. Back came the answer,

“The Jew . . . you majesty, the Jew.”

When God makes a promise He keeps it, whether it be to the jews, as in this case, or to you and to me.

His word is true. His promise is sure. You can cast all your cares upon Him for He cares for you. When God makes a promise He keeps it.

Second, God Works In Mysterious Ways His Wonders To Perform.

Who would think that there could be any connection between a drunken brawl and the plan of God, and yet in a strange wonderful way these are connected. A king gets drunk. He makes a wicked request of his wife. She refuses and is dethroned. An orphan girl who has been blessed with natural beauty is given the place of prominence, and through this Jewish exile, who becomes the queen of Persia, God's will for the survival of Israel is accomplished.

Or again, because of indigestion or some other cause, the king suffers from insomnia. To pass the hours he orders the court's records to be read. A brief entry telling of Mordecai's faithful service is mentioned. The king is impressed. Mordecai who has been in peril is raised to a place of honor and Haman who had plotted the extermination of the Jews is put to death instead.

Now skepticism may call this happenstance. But this is far too complex a chain of events to be the product of chance. Instead, we have here a towering mass of evidence to the truth of the statement: “God works in mysterious ways his wonders to perform.” As standing in the shadows God keeps watch above His own.

The third thing I see in this story that,

Though God May Be Out Of Our sight, We Are Never Out Of His.

Some people have been distressed by the fact that the name of God is never mentioned in this book. But as Clarence Macartney points out,

“If the name of God is not here, the fact, the power, the presence of God, is here. (In fact) no book of the Bible teaches the sovereignty of God more clearly. In reality, the name of God is written on every page of the book.”

In one of the Psalms, David says,

“He that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep.”

Jehovah is on 24-hour duty and as Dr. J. Sidlow Baxter suggests,

“God may be invisible, but he is also infallible. He may be strangely silent, but he remains actively sovereign. He may be unsuspecting, yet omnisciently, omnipresently, omnipotently. He guides and guards. Evil may be temporarily permitted, but it is ultimately frustrated. Behind the frowning providence God hides a shining face.”

He may be out of our sight, but we are never out of His. Last but not least, is the observation that,

God Has A Place For Each Of Us To fill.

We are not great queens like Esther with the deliverance of Israel in our hands, but we are what we are, and we must be what we can be.

We all have our circle of influence. We all have our own special opportunities to live and move and have our being. There is no one else on earth exactly like you. There has never been and there never will be. What a chance you have to be really special. As a child of God you are in a position of “royalty.” Who knows but that your “spiritual royalty” is for just such a time as this.

Who knows but that God blessed you in some way which makes you part of His answer to some need. You have a chance to do the job that only you can do. To fill the place that only you can fill. To exert the influence only you can exert. To bear the weight only you can bear. To speak the word only you can speak. To save a soul only you can save.

I believe God would have me challenge you to rise to greatness of life. To be part of the answer instead of part of the problem. To be done with living a careless, flippant, butterfly life without any serious thought or desire or purpose apart from your own personal pleasure and that of your family.

Oh, my friend, will you do it? Will you rise to greatness of life? Will you choose God's side? I pray that you will because the cause of Christ needs to feel “the stubborn ounces of your weight!”

“Grant us the will to fashion as we feel,
Grant us the strength to labor as we know,
Grant us the purpose, ribbed as edged with steel,
To strike the blow.

Knowledge we ask not, knowledge thou has lent,
But, Lord, the will, there lies our bigger need,
Give us the will to build above the deep intent
The deed, the deed.”