

ESTHER: A QUEEN UNDER CONTROL

by Ray C. Stedman

This little gem, tucked away in an obscure corner of the Old Testament, is a very rich book, and it is historical. Although there are unfortunately those today who suggest that some of the stories in the Old Testament are legends, there is substantial evidence that the events of Esther actually occurred. It took place in the days of Israel's captivity when as a nation it was under bondage to Babylon. During the days of that captivity a man arose who, as prime minister of Babylon, launched an attack on the Jews and tried to stamp out these people, just as Hitler tried in a more recent time. God moved in a wonderful way to deliver his people through Esther, who became the queen of this foreign kingdom.

In this book you have one of the most exciting stories of all time. It is more than simply a story of God's power in delivering the Jews. In one sense it is the most unusual account in the Bible because the name of God never appears in it. There is mention of neither heaven nor hell. There is no mention of anything particularly religious. It is the kind of story that you might find in the pages of a literary periodical, but here it is in the Bible. Many have wondered why that is so, and the answer is that this is a marvelous parallel to what is going on in our own lives. The thing that makes this book so fascinating is that this is our story. As we trace through the events of this book we can see how accurately it illustrates what is happening to us when God is at work in the human heart. Paul gives us the key in the New Testament when he says, "...these things...were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come." (I Cor. 10:11)

The story is that of a king and his kingdom. The king divorces the queen who is at his side when the story opens, and thereby becomes a lonely man by his own decree. He is powerless to change the decree after it is issued, and in his loneliness he begins a search for a new queen. As we trace this story we will find that it runs exactly parallel to that of mankind. The book opens in a time of peace and blessing with the king throwing a great feast for his lords. There are hundreds and thousands of people there, and the feast lasts for six months. During this time the king has nothing to do but to lavishly display the glory and beauty of his kingdom.

Interestingly enough, we discover in the Scriptures that man was made to be king like this. We have seen this pattern before. Each of us is given a kingdom over which to rule. Our soul is the kingdom, including the faculties of mind, emotion, and, above all, the right to choose. Man's body is the capital city of this kingdom. The empire includes all that he influences and touches. The king, seated upon the throne of that kingdom, is the will. There is also a hidden member of our life -- the inner life, or spirit, as we shall see. This is the deepest and most sensitive part of our being, the part designed to be in touch with God, the place where God himself is to dwell.

Now, as we see that this king had nothing to do but to display the glory of his kingdom, so also man, when he first appeared on earth, had nothing to do but display the glory of God who indwelt him and to rule in dominion over the earth given to him. But this king lifted himself up in pride and tried to destroy his queen. That is, he tried to disgrace her by summoning her to display her beauty before the whole court.

This is a picture of us, paralleling the account of the fall of man, when man chose to assert his reason over the supremacy of revelation. In the palace of man's spirit, symbolized by the queen in this story, dwelt the God of glory and truth. It was there that the mind, emotions, and will of man were guided by fellowship with the living Lord, who dwelt in the royal residence of the spirit. Man was to subject his reason to revelation and in doing so he would fulfill his destiny and utilize the full powers of his humanity in the purpose for which they were intended. However, as you know, there was introduced into life a principle that tempted man to assert the power of his reason over revelation. Man began to choose what he himself wanted to do, rather than what God wanted him to do, and with this came the fall.

This is portrayed for us in the opening chapters of Esther, when the king issued a decree that the queen was to be deposed from the throne. This decree became the law of the Medes and the Persians and the king could do nothing about it once it was issued. From then on he became a lonely king. In his loneliness he began to search

for a new queen. The proclamation was sent out through all the kingdom to bring all the beautiful maidens before him. One by one they appeared, among them a beautiful girl named Esther, who was one of the captives taken from Jerusalem and brought over into the land of Babylon. With her was her cousin Mordecai. These two are the most important characters in this story. Esther pictures the renewed spirit that is given to man when he becomes a Christian, when he is regenerated, when his spirit is made alive in Jesus Christ. She is under the influence and control of her cousin, Mordecai, who throughout this book is a picture for us of the Holy Spirit and his activity in our lives. This man's name means "little man" -- man in his humility -- and he is thus a picture of Christ.

In chapter 2 the Spirit is received when Esther, under the control of her cousin, Mordecai, is brought before the king and he falls in love with her. Because of her beauty he immediately chooses her to be his queen and exalts her to the second place in the kingdom. In that scene you have a picture of what might be called the conversion of this king. He receives a new spirit, without understanding that the Holy Spirit, also, is involved -- many of us today may have failed to understand this at the moment of our becoming Christians. But Mordecai is there in the background and we shall see how he becomes one of the prominent characters in this story of the wonderful deliverance of the kingdom.

Now in chapter 3 of this book we are introduced to the villain, a slimy character by the name of Haman the Agagite. As you trace this man's ancestry back through Scripture you discover that an Agagite is an Amalekite, and Amalek was that race of people, descendants of Esau, against whom God had said he would make war forever. (Ex. 17:16) King Saul had been ordered to completely eliminate this people, but in his folly he chose to spare Agag the king of the Amalekites and thus perpetuated this faithless force in Israel. Throughout the whole of Scripture, this tribe of Amalekites represents the indwelling desire in our hearts that is continually opposed to all that God wants to do. This is what the New Testament calls "the flesh," and whenever the Spirit of God begins to move to bless us, this thing rises up to oppose the Spirit and do all it can in its subtle, clever, crafty way to hinder the work of God. Now that is Haman.

In chapter 3 we read that as soon as Haman comes to wield power in a place of prominence just below the king, he is immediately antagonistic toward Mordecai. These two are instantly in direct conflict because Haman was "the enemy of the Jews." Learning that Mordecai is a Jew, he vows to eliminate him from the kingdom, and all through this account we read over and over again that the thing characterizing Haman is that he hates the Jews. Now why does he hate the Jews? Chapter 3, verse 8, says:

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them." {Est 3:8 RSV}

In other words, here is a people -- who obey a different life principle. Just as the spirit of man indwelt by the Holy Spirit is immediately subject to a different rule of living, a different way of thinking, a different demand, so these Jews are obeying a different principle. Because they are God's people, Haman is furious in his rage against them -- and he concocts a terrible strategy. This man was very clever, just as the flesh within us is very clever in its strategy to keep us under bondage. The story of this book is about the way God works to get the wrong man out of control and the right man in. The reason we have problems as Christians -- even after being born again -- is that the flesh subtly and cleverly opposes all that God attempts to do in our lives. These words in Galatians accurately describe the whole struggle:

For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you would. {Gal 5:17 RSV}

Now Haman immediately goes to work to persuade the king that, for the king's own benefit, he should eliminate these people. Haman, then, becomes the power behind the throne. He controls the king. The king does what Haman wants him to do, and issues an edict to eliminate the Jews from all the kingdom. Just so, in our lives the flesh continually strives to render inoperative the control of the Holy Spirit and to cause us to continually walk according to the old self-serving, self-loving, self-satisfying principles that prevail in the

world around us. We read that when Haman and Mordecai come face-to-face this enmity begins. The Spirit is resisted and, at the close of chapter 3, Haman has prevailed upon the king to give him the royal ring -- the mark of authority and power -- and to issue the edict which would destroy the Jews throughout the kingdom.

After he does this, the king in his folly thinks that Haman is his friend, and invites him in to have a drink and to pat him on the back. He congratulates himself on his cleverness with Haman. Often in our own lives we think that we too have displayed cleverness in standing up for our own rights and insisting that nobody walk roughshod over us. We feel that we have acted very cleverly, and congratulate ourselves for exercising control over a situation. Yet all the time we are unaware that in our utter folly we have done the very thing that will instead continue to wreak havoc in our lives and put us entirely at the mercy of this deadly enemy within, the flesh.

In chapter 4 we have the story of how God begins to move. Mordecai is grieved. Haven't you had this experience of living with a grieved Spirit? The first thing that the Spirit of God does when we begin to walk in the flesh is to create a sense of disquiet within, a sense of grief. It is deep within us. We hardly know how to put our finger on it. We know that something is not right, but we don't know what it is. Esther sees that Mordecai is very distressed and, not knowing what to do, she sends him a change of clothes, hoping that will take care of the problem. Many times when we are distressed and grieved in spirit because of our attitudes and our activities, we often think that some superficial change will correct the matter. We think the problem concerns only what we are doing, and not what we are.

Then Mordecai sends a messenger named Hathach (by the way, that means the truth) to convince Esther that she is up against a serious problem. He unfolds to Esther the whole deadly plot of this cunning Haman: how he is out to destroy the Jews, including the queen herself, although Haman does not know that Esther is a Jew. When Esther hears this she is disturbed and doesn't know what to do. Mordecai sends her further word, saying, "Now you must go to the king."

The problem is to get the king to understand that Haman is not his friend, just as the problem in our lives is to get us to really believe God when he tells us that the principles that characterize the flesh are not our friends. They are not on our side. When we get stubborn, belligerent, difficult, impatient -- when we demonstrate qualities that characterize the flesh -- we are not working for our own interests. We think we are. We think that these are the things that give us manliness and humanity and strength of character and so on. And here we have a deluded king who doesn't know that his supposed best friend is really his worst enemy.

What Mordecai has asked Esther to do is a dangerous thing; to appear before the king without being summoned was in itself a sentence of death. So Esther sends word back to Mordecai, "You don't know what you are asking me to do. Don't you know that in asking me to go before the king like this you are literally sentencing me to death? The very moment that I step across that threshold, my life is forfeited. You are asking me to die." And she suggests that perhaps some other way can be worked out; and Mordecai replies bluntly, "Don't try to outwit Haman yourself. If you think you can outwit the strategy and cleverness of this man, you are wrong. He'll outwit you. He'll out maneuver you. He'll move in behind you. He'll trap you. You will end up whipped." This is what the seventh chapter in Romans so clearly teaches us. If we think that we can handle the flesh with our will-power alone, we are whipped.

This is one of the most difficult things to grasp about the Christian life. It is the most elusive thing to understand -- that we must come to the end of ourselves, and that we must die to our own resources in order to handle the flesh. We cannot do this alone. We cannot do it by clenching our fists or gritting our teeth or signing New Year's resolutions, or by determining we are not going to act in a certain way any longer. Esther must learn that the only one who is capable of handling Haman is Mordecai, and she must be willing to die to her own resources in order to handle this man.

As Esther faces this truth, she says:

"Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish." {Est 4:16

RSV}

"After three days and nights" -- that certainly is significant, isn't it? Three days and nights Jesus Christ lay in the grave on our behalf. dead for us. On the third day Esther puts on her royal robes and stands in the inner courts of the king's palace opposite the king's hall, waiting in fear and uncertainty, hardly knowing what will happen when the king sees her. But when he does, he sees her in the beauty of the resurrected life. "On the third day" she comes. on the day of resurrection, in power and glory, and his heart is captivated by her beauty. He says to Queen Esther, "Ask anything you want. I will give it to you, up to half of my kingdom."

Then we find a strange thing taking place. Esther doesn't ask him for anything; she simply asks him to dinner the next day and says to bring Haman along. What is the meaning of that? I think there is nothing more significant than this: we never can second-guess the Holy Spirit in the way he will handle a situation. We never know how he is going to work. The apparently logical response would have been that Esther immediately say, "Look, you asked me to make a request. What I want is the head of Haman on a platter." But she doesn't do that. Evidently in obedience to Mordecai's orders, she waits. And while she waits, we discover that something interesting happens: Haman is trapped by his own folly. Mordecai gives Esther directions to invite the king and Haman to dinner. After the dinner, the king asks her what she wants, and she says, "I want you to come back again tomorrow night for dinner." Haman goes out walking on air, absolutely and completely thrilled with what has happened. He returns to his wife and his sons, and says, "I knew I was the king's fair-haired boy, but now I discover that I am the queen's favorite as well. I've got them eating right out of my hand." He begins to boast of his exploits,

Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. {Est 5:9 RSV}

When the flesh within us boasts and becomes arrogant and proud, and we congratulate ourselves on the way we stick up for our rights and the way we can cleverly maneuver things around as we want them, there is One who remains totally unimpressed -- the Holy Spirit. He is not at all intimidated by our cleverness. This grates on Haman and eats at his heart, and he says to his wife and sons, "I cannot live, I cannot stand it as long as this man Mordecai is in the court." His wife says, "If he stands in your way, get rid of him. Hang him. Erect a gallows 75 feet high (that's how high 50 cubits is) and in the morning go tell the king to hand him." Isn't that just like the flesh? If anything gets in your way, get rid of it. Don't let anybody stand in your way. Move right on through. Assert yourself. Stick out your chest and walk right on in as tyrant -- king of your world.

Well, it looks as though the wrong man is going to end up on the gallows, doesn't it? But the plot is saved, and do you know what turned the trick? Pizza, late at night. At least that's what I think it was, for we read,

On that night the king could not sleep; and he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. {Est 6:1 RSV}

He found how certain men, Bigthana and Teresh, two of his own guards. had plotted against his life. He read that Mordecai had found it out and reported it, so that these two men were put to death as traitors against the king. This was recorded in the book and it was by the book that deliverance began to come. for there the king discovered who his real friend was. And as he read, he noted that he had done nothing to honor Mordecai.

Have you ever had that experience while reading in the book of memorable deeds about the most memorable deed of all history? You learn that One took your place and died in your stead and fought off all the powers of darkness and hell for your sake, laying down his life on your behalf; and it suddenly dawns on you that you have done nothing to honor him, nothing to thank him. When the king reaches this point he calls for whoever is in the outside court to come in -- and who is there but Haman! He comes in and the king asks him for advice:

"What can the king do to the man in whom he delights?" {cf, Est 6:6}

Of course the flesh always knows who that is. Haman thinks, "Well, who else would be the king's favorite

but me?" Thus he thinks of the greatest honor he could possibly enjoy. He says to the king, "If you really want to honor the man in whom you delight, then give him your crown, your robe, your authority, everything you are, and set him on your horse. Then appoint some prince to lead him through the city and cry out, "This is the man in whom the king delights!" So the king says, "Haman that is wonderful. Go do it for Mordecai."

I would love to have seen Haman's face right then! But the interesting thing is that he does it. He does it! He goes through with this grinding, humiliating thing. He takes Mordecai, his hated enemy, and puts him on the horse and leads him through the city. Can't you see him calling out as he goes along, "This is the man the king delights to honor." But in his heart he is burning with furious rage and envy against this man. The point is, however, that the flesh does it. It will do anything for the sake of survival. It will get religious. It will come to church. It will sing in the choir. It will preach. It will pass out the hymn books. It will take up the collection. It will usher. It will give a testimony. It will do anything in order to survive.

Recently a converted Christian actor, a wonderful Christian man, told me of being in a great church in New York City -- and, as a member of the young people's band, he went out with others to give testimonies before a group. He said the language was exactly the same as evangelicals use but the whole thrust of it was to the exaltation of the people who were giving the testimonies. There was a brassy brilliance about it that marked it as something not genuine. He said, "I learned there how the flesh can do everything religious and still be the flesh." That is what is pictured here by Haman's action.

The next day the king Haman and Esther come together and there Queen Esther reveals the perfidy of Haman. The king is horror-struck. He doesn't know for a moment what to do. He goes out in the garden and paces up and down, just as you and I do when the spirit of God suddenly reveals to us that this thing we have been protecting and building fences around and excusing in ourselves is the great enemy of our souls. We realize like the king, that a drastic change is called for. For it is a drastic thing to kill a prime minister, but that is what Queen Esther is asking for. The king knows that there can be no deliverance in his kingdom until this matter is ended, so he gives the orders: "Hang him on the gallows prepared for Mordecai." So Haman is hanged on that gallows.

In chapter 8 we read:

On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, {Est 8:1a RSV}

Mordecai is now in the place of power. This is the fullness of the Spirit. In chapter 2 the Spirit is received. In chapter 3, the Spirit is resisted. In chapter 4, the Spirit is grieved. In the last part of chapter 4, the Spirit is quenched. Now you have the fullness of the Spirit. With Mordecai coming to power in this empire everything begins to change. Instantly another decree goes out. allowing the Jews to fight their enemies and slay them.

Just so, in chapter 8 of Romans we are told that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has now been issued. It sets us free from the law of sin and death and when we act in obedience to that new law -- standing against these enemies that are at work in our own life, refusing to acknowledge their power -- we discover that the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus lifts us up and gives us victory and power in the place where we were once defeated. Here at the end of the book we discover the same king and the same kingdom -- just as you are the same person, living in the same home, among the same people, working in the same shop -- but with a different government, a different management. Mordecai is now on the throne. One brief passage in the book of Romans outlines the whole story of this book. It says:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh [Haman-minded] but according to the Spirit [Mordecai-minded]. {Rom 8:3-4 RSV}

Prayer:

Our Father, we thank you for this beautiful story and pray that we might grasp it and understand it. May this book speak to us and teach us what is happening in our own lives, so that we may discover the victory that is available to us today. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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