
A Queen Sought

Esther 2:1-18

Introduction

The most eligible bachelor show...

How would you go about making sure your family is going to be safe?

Steps you take...

What you prevent...

What you provide...

Finding a Queen

(v.1-4)

The feast is over. The legislation has been sent to all the kingdom. King Ahasuerus' queen has been removed because of her disobeying the king. Now what?

¹ After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. ² Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king." ³ And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. ⁴ And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

Needing Consoling

Some time has passed. The king may be regretting his decision. His anger is gone. He is in a more sober and contemplative frame of mind. But he cannot reverse his edict. He misses his queen.

Receiving Counsel

The young men around him who had been his counselors at the feast observe the king's loneliness and regret. Some think that they were concerned that the king would remember that it was their counsel that put him in this predicament. They step forward with a plan to search for a new queen. Don't look back to what can't be changed. Let's look forward to finding someone new.

Now, this sounds a bit like, let's do a Miss Persia contest. Usually, King Ahasuerus would have taken a queen from among the seven noble families of Persia. However, his counselors suggest a nationwide search among all the beautiful women in the kingdom. Create a new bureaucracy in the kingdom to carry out this search. Bring the women to the citadel. Put them in the care of Hegai who is in charge of the house of women who will prepare them for the king. Then, let the king choose from among them one who pleases him to become queen.

This is amusingly like Persia's version of the "Most Eligible Bachelor" show. Except it would not have been amusing to the women. While many women would have volunteered, many would have been forced by family and possibly even the local government official.

These beautiful women would be subjected to a yearlong process designed to enhance their beauty. Persia was well known for its herbal and spa baths. It had a well-developed cosmetics industry. They knew quite a lot about dealing with blemishes and imperfections. Each woman was to be as beautiful as she could possibly be. We cannot help but notice the focus on the outward beauty. Was the inner character considered at all? Imagine the difficulties of all these young, beautiful women all living together for at least a year. They were all competing for one man's attention with the prize being queen of the most powerful man in the most powerful kingdom on earth.

Identifying our Heroes

(v.5-7)

In this setting we are introduced to a respected man and his young cousin.

⁵ Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, ⁶ who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. ⁷ He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

Mordecai

(v.5-6)

We are introduced to Mordecai. His family lineage is very interesting Biblically. He is a Jew. The names mentioned here as his family line would be familiar to the original reader of this book. Following the Jewish custom, the word "son of" does not mean "his biological dad was." These names are chosen to place him Jewish history. He is of the same tribe and family as the first king of Israel, King Saul (1 Samuel 9:1). He also seems to be identified as a descendent of Shimei, a man who met and cursed King David when he was fleeing from his rebellious son, Absalom (2 Samuel 16:5).

He was carried away from Israel into Babylonian captivity. In 597 BC, he was taken in the first wave of deportations with Jeconiah, the king. We are not told how old Mordecai was but it is likely he was one of the young teens who was taken to be assimilated into the culture and government. Given what follows, that assimilation seems to have been rather successful.

Esther**(v.7)**

Mordecai had a cousin, the daughter of his father's brother. Evidently her parents had died. Mordecai took her in and was rearing her as his daughter. His love and care for her is going to brighten this story and mark his life. This young lady's name was Hadassah which means "myrtle" in the Persian and refers to one of the most beautiful flowers in use in the Persian culture. She was also known as Esther which means "star". The myrtle flower was known as the star flower so these two names fit her well.

Esther was a very beautiful young woman. She is described as beautiful in form and feature. So each feature was lovely and it all fit together beautifully. So we begin to see the sovereign hand of God. He had determined Mordecai's family and situation. He had positioned him to be Esther's guardian. He had designed Esther to be beautiful and lovely to the eye. God has put into the mind of Ahasuerus' counselors a means to select the queen that would give Esther a chance. This is no accident. This is the purposes and plans of God being worked out in the real lives of people.

Providing for Esther**(v.8-11)**

You can guess where the story is going...

⁸ So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. ⁹ And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem.

Placed in the Women's House**(v.8)**

The general command is issued in which the selected women are to be taken. While some may have volunteered, the sense here is that of being drafted. They may have been offered up by their families because of the prize to be won. And certainly some were simply identified and taken to Susa and put into Hegai's custody.

This seems to be the case of Esther. She was taken into the King's palace and put in Hegai's charge. At this point in the story we would not be sure that she had not volunteered herself or that Mordecai had not put her forward. We know she was taken and where she ended up.

Pleased the Head Steward**(v.9)**

Esther's character pleased Hegai. Listen, he surrounded by the most beautiful women in the kingdom. He is pleased with the kind of person she is. He can see something special in her. Some of the old translations say, "She found grace in his eyes." She carried herself in such a way that he wanted to show her favor. And he did. He gave her special advantage, treatment and brought her to the head of house of women. She was given special food and maid servants to care for her. She is his favorite.

Now, the Bible does not specifically say this, but it takes little imagination to see the jealousy, anger and vitriol she would incur due to this favor. Yet, the silence of the text

and what takes place later seems to indicate that her grace and goodness won the respect and loyalty of the women there.

Cared for by her Cousin

(v. 10-11)

¹⁰ Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. ¹¹ And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

While Esther has been taken captive, if you will, she is still being cared for by Mordecai. For her own well-being and safety, he tells her not to reveal that she is a Jewess. She readily submits to his command and does not reveal her nationality. He cared for his ward and was deeply concerned about what would happen to her in the women's house. Every day, he went to where she was being kept and inquired after her welfare. We find later that he gained the respect and trust of the servants at the door.

God has orchestrated the situation to place Esther where she was. Make no mistake about that. She is not there by chance and God is trying to salvage the problem. No, He has made her the young lady she is. He has placed in her life this magisterial cousin whose care, command and counsel is wise.

Detailing the Process

(v.12-14)

For those who might not be familiar with the Persian way, our author gives us the detail of the process.

¹² Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women— ¹³ when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. ¹⁴ In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

Her Preparation

(v.12-13)

The women go through an extensive beauty enhancement process. It was a 12 month regimen designed to deal with any imperfections. Since many of these beautiful ladies would have come from poorer backgrounds, they would not have had access to the costly oils and perfumes that were so much a part of the Middle Eastern and Persian beauty.

Her Presentation

(v.14)

In the plan, when it was the young lady's turn to be presented to the king and to spend the night with him, she was allowed to take anything with her. It could be a memento of her time, a gift from a friend. The idea was that once she had been with the king, she was not coming back to the women's house. After her night with Ahaseurus, she would

be his concubine. So she would live in the palace house of the concubines, the harem under the control of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch.

Concubinage was common among royalty and some among the rich. It was a way of having multiple wives without diluting the royal line. One wife would be designated the queen. Her children would be the royal heirs. The life of a concubine was often opulent and decadent but with little true love. They were occasionally with the king but rarely had anything beyond a casual relationship with him.

Once the young lady had been with the king sexually, she was now his concubine. The fervent hope among all of these young ladies was that he would select her to be the next queen. But that selection was not likely to take place on the night of her being with the king and probably not on the next day either. So she would wait in the palace harem for the announcement that the king had summoned her.

Selecting Esther

(v.15-18)

Certainly Esther's turn was going to come. She is a foreign land. She has lost her parents. Her older cousin is rearing her as a daughter. She has been taken by the king's command and power to be prepared for one night with king in the possibility of becoming his queen. What is astonishing in the Bible record is her calm, her grace, her ability to win the favor of those responsible for her and even her competitive peers.

¹⁵ When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. ¹⁶ And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, ¹⁷ the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. ¹⁸ Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

Gaining the Favor with All

(v.15)

Here we are given a moments insight into the winsome character of Esther. It had to be a scary time. It is her time. She has been promoted to the head of the harem. She has been given maid servants and her own menu. She is allowed to take anything with her that she wants so that she can have it, presumably in the concubine's house or harem. Instead of choosing for herself, she asks Hegai and takes what he advised. She relied on his superior knowledge of the situation and the king and what was going on to know what was best to take.

It is little wonder then the line, "Esther was winning favor in everyone's eyes." That little glimpse of asking the chief eunuch's advice tells us how she thought and treated others. The consequence was that she was accepted and admired by all.

Further we see another aspect of Esther's character. She is one who is willing to follow the counsel given to her. She does what Mordecai says in not revealing her nationality.

She seeks out the counsel of Hegai and follows it. So God has inclined her heart to submit to authority and value the wisdom and advice of others. All to good effect.

Winning the Love of the King

(v.16-17)

Four years after removing Vashti as queen, Esther's turn comes. We know the exact month and year in reference to Ahaseurus' reign. She is taken in to the queen for her one night. And she wins the grace and favor of the king. His heart is captured and he loves her more than all that have come before.

The language here for her winning the king's grace, favor and love is the language that is used through the Bible of people finding grace in God's sight. I think the idea here is pull back the curtain a bit and remind us that this is God's doing. Yes, she is gracious and winsome person. But God is inclining the heart of all around her to accept and like her. Just as Proverbs 21:1 tells us, "*The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.*" And He has turned the heart of Ahaseurus to love this young, Jewish maiden. The word here for love is one that represents a deep emotional bond¹.

Becoming the Queen of the Land

(v.17)

She is chosen by the king. She won his favor and grace. He has fallen in love with her. She is to be queen. I am sure at there is much more pomp and ritual that took place than is given us here. The story is being told in stark simplicity. She is chosen. She is crowned. She becomes queen in Vashti's place. An announcement would have been made. A coronation planned. The focus of the story has now shifted from the power and prestige of Ahaseurus, to the simple elegance and grace of Queen Esther.

Fueling the Generosity of the King

(v.18)

Want to see her affect on him? Here it is. He throws a great feast to honor his new queen. We know how lavish those feasts could be. But Esther is at his side. She is being celebrated. To mark this auspicious occasion, he reduces taxes and he gives lavish gifts. Unlike his earlier feasts and generosity, this is seen as simply an overflow of his love for his queen and the happiness he feels. And behind it possibly, may be the gracious winsome urging of his new queen. "Do something good for your people. Show them that love for someone can overflow onto all. Let this new start be one that relieves burdens and enriches others."

Reflect and Respond

While God is not visible in this story, He is certainly present.

The Lord is sovereignly ordering events to accomplish His hidden purposes. At this point we do not know exactly why. We do see that He has so moved as to make Esther queen.

The Lord's character shines through Mordecai and Esther. They are what they are like because of who God is.

In whatever circumstances we find ourselves, we can and ought to respond in a way that pleases the Lord. We should be willing to seek out and follow wise counsel. We should be gracious to others.

We do not make it a goal to try to curry favor with people. We simply live like God wants us to live in a gracious and kind way and then let God take care of people favoring us.

Do you see God at work in your life? He may be invisible, but He is never absent.

¹ Prime, Derek. *Unspoken Lessons About the Unseen God: Esther Simply Explained*. Welwyn Commentary Series. Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2001. p. 52.