

## ESTHER 7

### ESTHER IS ENABLED BY GOD'S GRACE TO PRESENT HER PETITION TO KING XERXES

In the previous chapter we saw how Mordechai was honoured and how Haman, the arch-enemy of Israel, had to provide this honour. This happened after the first banquet with Queen Esther. Now we read about the second banquet, where Esther must finally make known what her request is.

We do not know whether Esther had heard about Mordechai being honoured. Many explainers suggest that she did not know, because the women at the royal court were mostly kept in the dark about matters of state. But we must be careful with that conclusion: someone like the queen, as Esther has shown already, has her ways of communicating with the outside world. Her attendants appreciated her enough to keep her informed of major happenings. The public honouring of Mordechai certainly was a major event in Susa.

#### THE TIME HAS COME

Nevertheless, whether she knew or not about Mordechai's latest experience of being high on the royal honour roll, Esther goes into this second meeting, this banquet, with the knowledge that now her time has come. She must speak; it's now or never. She is now mentally and spiritually prepared for this great test. Besides, she cannot keep postponing things, for the king will demand that she make her request known.

We have arrived here at the very *heart* of the book of Esther. It is for this moment that the LORD has placed her in the palace as Queen of Persia. Esther knew this moment would come, and she has had time to prepare for it, but now actually going through it, is quite a different matter. Now more than ever, she needs the help and the guidance of the LORD. Will she be able to save her people by the grace of God for the coming of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus?

#### FAITH AND WISDOM

Having written that, I am again strongly aware of the fact that the Name of the LORD is not mentioned, not even now. It seems as if the LORD has completely hidden himself. Does Esther go into this key experience alone without the LORD? There are those who tackle life's problems and challenges without prayer, without asking God for his help. How does Esther go into this hour of truth?

To discover this, we have to note exactly how she acts and speaks. Remember that the book of Esther is often associated with the wisdom literature. Whatever reason there may be for not mentioning the Name of the LORD, this does not imply that his presence and help go unrecognized! Esther's bond with

God is evident in her words and deeds. Does she act as a “fool” who trusts in her own tactics, or as one who is truly wise? In this context wisdom is know-how in dependence upon the LORD.

The book of Esther does not tell us that we can do without God; on the contrary, it tells us what we can do with God, how we must act in faith upon God in difficult times with the wisdom that he has given to his people. In this chapter we read how Esther is enabled by God’s grace to present her petition to king Xerxes in the presence of Haman, the enemy of God’s people. We will see Esther’s wisdom, Xerxes’ fury, and Haman’s horror.

### NO DEMAND BUT A PLEA

There has been another sumptuous banquet. It is after the meal, as they are enjoying the wine that is served at that time, that king Xerxes again asks Esther: what is your petition? What is your request? And for the second time he comes with the magnanimous gesture: even up to half of the kingdom, it will be granted! This is, as we saw, more a manner of speaking than a real offer of the sort. The king simply indicates that he is willing to give her what she wants. It’s almost like a term of endearment to indicate Esther’s special place and status.

Now Esther does not blurt it out, “You and Haman want to kill all the Jews, and I am also a Jew, and so I will be killed as well. How could you ever decide to do this evil thing, please stop it! I demand that you recall the edict against the Jews”. That might perhaps have been the style of a Marie Antoinette with her cake, it is not the style of Esther, who knows that she is queen by the grace of God. Esther makes no demands; she comes with a plea.

Actually she addresses the king carefully in the language and with the decorum that is proper at the royal court. She does not act like the proverbial bull in the china shop. Notice the introductory phrases (verse 3): if I have found favour with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty.... Even as queen, and notice how often in this chapter she is called “Queen Esther”, she does not presume on her royal position or status, but she acknowledges her subservient place in the king’s court.

### PETITION AND REQUEST

You see here the difference with the approach of Vashti, who was queen according to her own standards and tried to lay the law down to the king. She was promptly dismissed, for the king’s honour may never be tarnished, especially not by his queen. What may then sound to us as a long-winded, even obsequious approach, is fully in keeping with the royal etiquette. Even after a meal, with much wine, when people sometimes let down their guard and become a bit loose, Esther still carefully preserves the proper style.

Notice how the king, as earlier also, speaks about a petition and a request. I could not find any scholarly comments on the use of these two words, on their pos-

sible connection and distinction, so I hesitantly had to follow only my own insight. Some might see here only a form of Hebrew parallelism. But a petition seems to be more important, more far-reaching than a request. A petition also speaks of a greater need than just a request. The king does not know what Esther will ask, and so he uses both words, for the greater (petition) and the lesser matter (request).

Actually, if I read it well, Esther very keenly makes use of this distinction (between petition and request) in her answer. Her petition is: grant me my life. She herself emphasizes the word “petition”. “This is my petition” (verse 3). And then follows the “request”: and spare my people, this is my request!

### WHY HERSELF FIRST?

Notice how Esther puts herself first: grant me my life! Only after that does she say: and spare my people. Now Esther is not placing herself here above her people. She does not say: spare me, and maybe also my people. It’s not a matter of self-preservation that drives her. But she knows that the king -who might not care much for a certain people- does take great pride in his beautiful queen Esther. Should Esther be murdered and probably ravaged in the process by Haman’s mobs, the king’s honour and public image would be at stake. In a sense, then, Esther appeals to his *vanity*! This is perhaps the most enduring, successful tactic of woman: appeal to a man’s vanity. The mighty king alone can offer her the protection she needs.

This shows her “wisdom” indeed. Notice that Esther does not say: if you *love* me, grant me my life. What’s love got to do with it? This king with his immense harem, his constant shifting of sexual favourites, is hardly capable of true love. Attraction and infatuation, certainly, but not love. At least, Esther makes no illusions for herself here. The preserving of the queen’s life from Esther’s side is more a matter of the king’s favour and good pleasure -his graciousness- than true love. From the king’s side, it is a matter of honour and pride indeed: imagine if the king of Persia could not protect his own chosen queen!

### TO THE POINT

Now Esther has presented the petition and the request. Rather bluntly and to the point. The king, and perhaps even Haman, neither of whom knew that Esther was a Jewess, were rather surprised. Esther realizes that she has to give more information. She has driven home the main point, and now follow the necessary explanation and evidence.

She adds in the same breath (verse 4), “For I and my people have been sold for destruction, and slaughter, and annihilation.” There is a deepening of concepts here, describing an escalation in violence. “Sold” means that she and her people are the object of a conspiracy that involves much money. First “destruction”, which can mean that property damage is done. But then “slaughter”, which means that there will be many casualties. And finally “annihilation”, meaning that every-

one of her people is officially targeted to die, and in that sense Esther, too, faces death.

Notice that Esther has not yet mentioned any names. Not of Israel. Not of Haman. Not of the king. She does not accuse him at all. First build up your case, without being personal. As a matter of fact, she excuses herself for mentioning this to the king. Look at the second part of verse 4. Being “sold” was perhaps common in the empire, where there were many slaves. Esther says, “If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.”

This is a masterful move. Esther says: slavery, okay, I could have lived with that. Slaves are still alive, and some lead a relatively safe and good life. For such a trivial matter Esther would not have bothered the king. The king has enough responsibilities already than to get involved in the matter of a people who were sold as slaves. Slavery was part of the society of that time and it was nothing to get excited about. The king should not be disturbed with such matters. But genocide is a matter for the king! Here the highest authority in the land must be approached. Esther has no other avenue than to appeal directly to the king.

### **OVERDOING THINGS?**

At first I thought that Esther here is overdoing things by stating that she and her people would have accepted slavery. After all, wholesale slavery is not something to be taken without resistance. Is she is merely flattering the king? You are not to be disturbed over minor matters, your majesty, and I wouldn't have bothered you if it was just slavery, but it is genocide.

However, Esther is not really overdoing things. She wisely presents what would have been a much different situation, slavery, difficult still but different, in order to show the awful magnitude of what has been planned, a murder spree so violent and inclusive that even the queen of Persia is in danger of her life! A people can recover from slavery or live with it. Another exodus is possible by God's grace. Have not the prophets spoken about a remnant that shall return to the promised land? As long as there is life, there is hope. But if all are killed, and the line of the coming great Saviour, Israel's only hope, ends, all is lost.

We again see evidence of her genuine humility which flows forth from the wisdom of God. She does not overdo things. She does not embellish the plot of Haman, neither does she downplay the consequences. She has not yet accused anyone, but her words have made a deep impact on both Haman and the king!

In Proverbs 6 we read this wisdom that when we have fallen into our neighbour's hands -and we need not examine the reason for that now- in order to free ourselves, we must “go and humble [ourselves], press [our] plea with [our] neighbour”. Elsewhere in Proverbs we read: humility comes before honour! This is what Esther has done in simplicity and clarity. She has soberly and humbly presented the facts, and nothing else. The flow of things do not depend on her tac-

tics or strategy, but on the sovereign grace of God. She is queen by his grace, for his people, to defend their lives, and with that, the future of Israel, the way to the messianic kingdom of Jesus Christ.

We must always be truthful. But there are serious times when we humbly and soberly need to face the truth and speak it. Then we should do so, trusting that the LORD loves honest lips and contrite hearts, and that he will give his blessing.

## A TREMENDOUS IMPACT

For all this has a tremendous impact on the king and Haman. Let us first look at the reaction of king Xerxes. In verse 5 we read how the king with rising consternation asks Queen Esther: who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?

For a long time I wondered about this reaction of the king. Either the king is a superb actor or he is very forgetful. For it was not long ago that he had an edict to this effect sent throughout the empire. Did he not know its far-reaching contents? Are we to understand that for this king genocide was so unimportant that he has already dismissed it from his mind? Indeed, we must conclude that king Xerxes has given the matter of the Jews and their annihilation very little thought. Other things occupy his mind. After the initial agreement, he left the matter fully to Haman. For it was Haman's plan, and it became Haman's responsibility.

This king was not a very stable personality, and he seldom understood the consequences of his decisions, as became clear also in the war with Greece which he completely lost, despite his great strategy and planning. Historically speaking, and I put it mildly, the mighty and feared Xerxes was a bit of a flake.

Anyway, the king and Haman had not in any way made the connection that the slaughter of the Jews would directly affect someone in the royal family. They did not know that Esther was Jewish. Therefore the King's angry outburst: who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing? And Esther then gives a direct response (verse 6): the adversary and enemy is this vile Haman.

In the next verse we read how Haman then was terrified before the king and the queen. Here he sits at a special and private banquet with the king and the queen, seeing himself as their confidante and personal friend, but this woman has turned the tables: the adversary and enemy is this vile Haman!

## NO BLAME ON THE KING?

Esther does not pull any punches but goes for the knock-out blow. The words adversary and enemy denote the one responsible for the pending campaign. Adversary is more immediate as the one who has contrived the terrible plan, while the word enemy denotes more long-term hostility. Hatred has deep roots among enemies of old. The Agagites have always hated the Jews, and now they have succeeded in having a terrible plan adopted.

Esther very carefully ensures that no blame falls directly on the king. She

makes clear that the king was not told the full story or even the real truth. The Jews were not trouble-makers, who did not obey the king's commands, for they were in many ways model citizens. Therefore the addition "this vile Haman". The word "vile" contains a moral judgment. The man is utterly bad and completely dishonest. He does not serve the king or the empire, but seeks only his own interests! Esther places all the blame on Haman, for indeed it was his plan, and he did mislead the king, whose reputation is now tarnished by it, whose queen also runs the risk of death. This vile Haman! I can just imagine her pointing her finger at him, staring at him with deep contempt and holy anger.

Haman is terrified! We read that the king got up in a rage, left his wine, and went out into the palace garden (verse 7). He has to get up, he needs fresh air, even leaves his wine behind, and needs solitude to think, to control himself, and to get a grip on the situation.

### XERXES' LEGENDARY RAGE

The king more often fell into spells of rage. It can become a very nasty habit. He was furious when Queen Vashti refused to come to his banquet. He showed his rage against the gods and the elements when the Greeks decimated his fleet. Now he has a queen who in every way is humble and true, and someone wants to kill her and her people? All this is concocted by a man whom he trusted as a close confidante, whom he made a chief official? In his rage the king paces through the garden, he feels utterly taken, betrayed, made to look as a fool.

The king's legendary fury breaks loose! This man is head of the great Persian empire, the ruler of the world. The king may be furious that he was not told the whole truth, but nevertheless, he does retain his own responsibility. He should have asked more questions about Haman's plan. He should have identified the people meant and had Haman's complaint investigated. For he gave his signet ring to Haman. As I wrote earlier, it's like handing out a signed blank cheque. And you can become conveniently furious, when others abuse your trust, but you have to face also your own responsibility in the matter.

In the terms of the Biblical wisdom literature, Haman is indeed classified as an clear example of a *fool*. A fool never learns. Haman had not learned from the honouring of Mordechai that he might lose this battle. He was forewarned. The LORD was kind enough to let Haman see what would really happen. His family saw things more clearly and realistically. But Haman is blind. It is very foolish not to see the writing on the wall.

The same wisdom literature warns against rage. I think now of Ecclesiastes 7: 9 where it says, "Do not be quickly provoked in your spirit, for anger resides in the lap of fools." The king is also a fool. His haphazard governing, his wild adventures, his fits of uncontrolled rage attest to this. Everyone needs to learn anger management; but this applies especially those who are in office or hold a place of authority.

## EVEN MOLESTING THE QUEEN?

Now we know that while the king was pacing in wild fury about in the palace garden, Haman fell on his knees before Esther. In so doing he “fell on the couch” it says, and we must think of the low reclining couch on which people generally ate in those days. As he then falls on the couch he falls against or over Esther, who is probably frantically trying to push him off.

The king comes in and sees Haman in his attempt to get mercy from the queen. He calls out: will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house? Now there are explainers who think that the king here speaks genuinely. He really thought Haman was molesting the queen. But who in his right mind, in such an intensely precarious situation would think of a sexual relation? Or does the king mean by molesting that the queen is not even safe in the house of the king? In any case, Xerxes conveniently interprets the actions of Haman to seal the man’s fate. Touching the queen, let alone molesting her, was a capital crime. Haman will be condemned because he assaulted the queen.

Therefore it says in verse 8: as soon as the word left the king’s mouth, they covered Haman’s face. This was customary practice for a person sentenced to death. As soon as the sentence was passed, his face would be covered, and he would be led away and immediately executed. No mercy, no appeal, no last meal, no saying good-bye to anyone, away to instant death! Here, too, is wisdom. Those who show no mercy and would have brutally without due cause killed an entire people, receive no mercy.

## HAMAN’S HORROR

As we see the power of the king’s fury, consider also Haman’s horror. No man ever fell out of royal grace so quickly as Haman did. He is an honoured guest, a high official, at one moment, but a vile criminal, a despised man, at the next moment. Haman knew the ways of Persian justice. It says in verse 6 that Haman was terrified before the king and the queen. The king dashes out of the room in extreme anger. It says then: but Haman realizing that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind.... He was horrified, and horror means that you have the fear of death.

He experiences horror. Haman knew that he was as good as dead. We might wonder why Haman did not go after the king to try explain to him that it was all a mistake, that he never knew the queen was Jewish, and that another way out could be found. What would you have done? Go to the man with the highest authority? But Haman knew that the king was beside himself with fury. Xerxes was not acting rationally at this point. Therefore he turns to the only one who might have the ability yet to help, namely Esther. He pleads with her to save his life, probably promising her that he would instead find a way to do good to the Jews.

He falls down before her, reaches out to her, even takes hold of her. This was

totally against all royal etiquette. It was a crime for anyone besides the king and the queen's servants even to touch the queen. But in his own horror, Haman does not even think of the consequence of his present action. He becomes a groveling idiot. His very act of seeking help becomes the straw that breaks the camel's back! He is condemned to death.

### **AN IRONIC TWIST**

Perhaps the most ironic twist is that Haman is then hanged on the gallows he had erected by his own house, but meant for Mordechai. This Haman is one man, like Agag before him, who discovered what it means to scheme against God's covenant people. Then all your plans backfire, and destroy you in the end. For as God has said to Abraham already, many centuries earlier: I will bless them who bless you, and curse them who curse you. That stands in Esther's time and in our time.

For the living God has not changed. With the coming of Christ into this world, his death and resurrection, his glorious ascension into heaven, God's loving eyes are even more on his people who serve him. The promise of the covenant is sealed in the blood of Christ. Therefore also in our time the church of Christ will be gathered, defended, and preserved by God's grace. We have no earthly queen, like Esther. We do have a heavenly King, our Lord Jesus Christ!

Haman's horror must have been intense as they led him to his own house, where he was hanged on a gallows in full view of all his family and servants. That horror is nothing compared to the horror of hell, which is the designated place for all the enemies of the Gospel.

### **HORROR OR HOPE?**

Horror is a much-loved literary style and also movie genre. This horror is always the fear of an awful death. It is a wide-spread fear, which can easily be manipulated for profit. Why are horror novels such instant best-sellers? It is a genre which some writers and movie producers masterfully control: to make people feel the fear a gruesome death. Yet such books can hardly be uplifting, but are destructive, if not worse. Sometimes people -often young people- act out what they have read or seen in horror novels or movies.

Haman's horror leads to an awful and painful death. The Persians actually impaled their victims alive and left them to die. It says: then the king's fury subsided. He again becomes rational and controlled.

Our Lord and King is always in control of himself, and he controls all things. He takes away the fear and horror of death. The way is still kept open for the salvation of God's people. That's how God is. His wrath over his enemies is meant to protect his people and to promote the glory of his name. Even when that name is not mentioned, his footsteps are there for those who want to see them by faith. This is true in our lives.

Were it not for the LORD, Israel's remnant would have perished by Haman's plan. Today faithful believers everywhere would perish or fall away in apostasy. There are worse enemies than Haman. Satan wants to sift us like wheat, and cut us away from God's people (cf. Luke 22: 31). Do not fear. Christ prays for us that our faith may not fail.

Christians should not feel horror. The history of the church and of our lives is no horror novel. It will sometimes be a struggle, and we will know of fear. But Christ will preserve his church, every one who calls upon his name in truth and seeks his grace, and he will cause us to share in the blessing of life, peace, and joy.

No horror, but hope characterizes the Christian life.