

ESTHER 2

THE TASK OF ESTHER AND MORDECHAI REVEALED

When dealing with Esther 1, we looked at the place and function of the Persian Empire and we saw some of the principle figures, the mighty king Xerxes and his beautiful queen Vashti. We noted how Xerxes gave a great banquet, and during this time, with all the nobles and generals present, planned his strategy for the coming campaign against the Greeks.

During the final days of that feast, Xerxes ordered queen Vashti to join him so that he might proudly display her, but she refused. Vashti was promptly dismissed from the court, and the king was to search for a new queen. All this happens through God's sovereign government and wise providence, and opens the door for Esther to be made queen. The day comes for Esther's coronation, "Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favour and approval more than any of the other virgins. So he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti" (2: 17).

INTRODUCTION TO MORDECHAI AND ESTHER

The purpose of chapter 2, then, is to introduce to us Esther and her uncle Mordechai, who are the principal persons in the unfolding of the events. When you at first read the second chapter of Esther, you might wonder how these people, Mordechai and Esther, could act as they did. Mordechai comes across as a typical schemer, who uses another person, his adopted daughter, for his own purpose. Esther seems to be rather naive, for she allows herself to be involved in a pagan beauty contest, and submissively cooperates in every way.

We wonder, with many explainers, if Mordechai was perhaps ashamed of being an exiled Jew, for he forbade Esther to reveal her nationality and family background. See verse 10: Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordechai had forbidden her to do so. Why not come out for the truth, be proud of your heritage, trust in the Lord, and place everything in God's hands? Is this a man who will be instrumental in saving the people of Israel from being massacred? It all seems to be worldly and calculated. Is this true faith or human cunning?

The history of God's covenant shows us, however, that God often chooses the most unlikely people to work for the benefit of his covenant people. For these people do not ensure success through their schemes, but God shows his power in the weakness of his children, so that, here too, whoever boasts, must boast in the Lord (cf. 1 Cor 1: 31).

We notice, just as in the history of Joseph in Egypt, how the LORD opens doors for Esther and Mordechai, and causes them to be favoured and chosen for the task that he has in mind for them. In all this, his almighty power and sovereign grace become evident. We may learn to trust in this for our own lives as well, regardless of our task and position.

In this chapter we find that in blessing Esther and Mordechai, the LORD reveals their task in the preservation of his church. We see how they are presented by the Lord in preparation for their task, how they conduct themselves before the Lord in accepting their task, and how they experience the blessing of the Lord in fulfilling their task.

In formulating the theme of this chapter, I purposely stressed the name of the LORD. This is no human drama, or an interesting story, but this is the account of divine action. God is acting with wisdom and power. For what reason? There is only one reason imaginable: for the preservation and increase of his church! The LORD does not need these two exiles, Mordechai and Esther, but he sovereignly chooses them and places them where he wants, so that they function as he wills for the benefit of his church. He shapes and leads their lives so that they willingly and faithfully fulfill their task in his service.

A LONELY KING

It says in chapter 2:1, “Later when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her”. This most likely refers to the time after the second Persian war with the Greeks. As you know, Xerxes planned a mighty campaign against Greece, and he went off to war. However, the Persians could not succeed in gaining a decisive victory. Xerxes’ fleet was smashed, the supply lines of his army were cut, and he hightailed it back over the Bosphorus to Susa. He left a general behind in Greece with part of his army, but in effect, the war was lost.

This is how we find king Xerxes in chapter 2. We get the impression that Xerxes is somewhat lonely, and he remembered the gorgeous Vashti. He thought about her, and perhaps even came to the conclusion that her refusal showed determination, not rebellion. Vashti had character and courage! He would, perhaps, love to speak with her again, have her comfort him and stroke his ego. But he had decreed that she would never enter again in his court, and he is bound by his own law. So it goes sometimes: we make rules for others that in the end come to haunt ourselves.

How can we say that the mighty Xerxes became lonely? He had such a vast harem, so many women, that he could call up a new one every day. But Xerxes needs more than sex; you can only have so much of that. He needs a *wife*, a partner with whom he can have a relationship and in whom he can confide. He doesn’t need more concubines, but needs a *queen*.

AN IMPERIAL BEAUTY CONTEST

In verse 2 we read how the matter is noticed by Xerxes' personal attendants. They know his moods and feelings quite well. They can also speak with him informally. And they suggest that an imperial beauty contest be held, and that the most beautiful young woman be brought to Xerxes so that he can choose one as queen. Then Xerxes can forget about Vashti. Xerxes likes the idea, for it shows his majesty, and he proclaims an edict to this effect. His decision must take the form of an edict to ensure cooperation from all the citizens in his empire.

It is at this point that the writer of this book introduces Mordechai and Esther. This is not just coincidence, but a key element in the book of Esther: things happen at God's time. As Xerxes is looking for a wife, the LORD already has made his choice. The LORD is always far ahead of the ungodly to keep open the way for the gathering of his church.

WHO IS MORDECHAI?

What interests us now is how these two, Esther and Mordechai, are introduced and presented to us. Let us first look at what is said about Mordechai. He is introduced in verse 5 as "a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin". This tribe was the smallest in Israel. We might rather expect someone from a more prominent tribe, and I think of the tribe of Judah and of the house of David. But the smallest tribe is chosen to tackle the greatest empire. Note that little detail. God's sovereign grace, not human position and prowess, will win the day.

But there is more here. Mordechai is identified in verse 5 very precisely as the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish. At least three forefathers are mentioned, and this indicates that the "lineage" of Mordechai is very important. This lineage is, however, interpreted in different ways.

Many contemporary explainers suggest that the name "Kish" (which does not appear in some manuscripts in the original language) indicates a person who was carried into exile under Nebuchadnezzar to Babylon in the time of king Jehoiachin (2 Kings 24: 15). Mordechai would then be a third generation exile, a great-grandson of this Kish. The name Kish, however, is not mentioned at all in these places. In 2 Chronicles 29: 12 we do read about a certain Kish, the son of Abdi, who is one of the Levites chosen to purify the temple in the days of Hezekiah. Since Mordechai was of the tribe of Benjamin, he cannot be identified with the family of this Levite Kish.

Other explainers go in a different direction. They see the name "Kish" as referring to the father of king *Saul*. Mordechai would then not only be a Benjaminite, but also a direct descendent of Saul. Those who oppose this interpretation point out that if Mordechai is to be identified with Saul, then Saul also would have been mentioned, and the line would go like this: Mordechai, son of Jair, the son of Shimei, *the son of Saul*, the son of Kish. Since Saul is not mentioned, there is no connection in this respect.

To this objection we answer that a genealogy does not always contain every ancestor in order to make a point. But more importantly, Saul is not mentioned because he was unfaithful to the LORD and rejected by him. Mordechai, a descendent of Kish, related to Saul, does what Saul did not do: destroy the Amalekites (the Agagite, Haman) and all the enemies of God's people! We will take a closer look at this in the next chapter, but it is clear that a line is drawn to Kish to show that in this critical time God's sovereign grace is manifest in the selection of Benjamin, and from Benjamin, someone from the house of Kish, the father of Saul.

There is another good reason for this choice. The house of David has failed miserably in leading Israel. The result of the sins of the sons of David is the great exile. When the LORD now raises up a man who will work for Israel's deliverance, he returns to the tribe of Benjamin, to the house of Kish. This accentuates the sin of the house of David.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Here, also, we may see God's government and providence: the tribe of Benjamin, and the house of Kish, still have some unfinished business to complete. The LORD in this new work of salvation carries on with the work begun many ages before. This connection also demonstrates that the book of Esther does line up with the other books in the Old Testament in a very special way.

About Mordechai we read a number of things. He had a godly sense of duty towards his extended family. We read that he took in Hadassah (the Hebrew name of Esther), his cousin, who was orphaned, and brought her up as his own daughter. "As his own daughter" means also that Mordechai truly loved her and accorded her all the rights of every family member.

We also read, as mentioned, in verse 15, that Mordechai had forbidden Esther to reveal her nationality *and* family background. Notice the addition of "family background", being Benjamin, the line of Saul and Kish. Many explainers see this prohibition as a negative factor. It is even repeated in verse 20. It is clear that Mordechai from the beginning had carefully covered up Esther's nationality and background, and had, perhaps, re-emphasized it when she was taken to the royal harem. Why this cover-up?

We can say: it was meant for the protection of Esther. This does raise questions. Did Mordechai not trust in God? Does he resort to a method of secrecy because he is afraid that his family, if identified as Jews, will be disadvantaged? Was he maybe also afraid for his own life? Mordechai is sometimes seen as a schemer and a coward for hiding his family's true identify.

But this is not true. In chapter 3: 4 you can read that Mordechai in his growing conflict with Haman for whom he will not bow, gives precisely the explanation *that he is a Jew*. Jews do not bow for Amalekites, especially not descendants of king Agag, whom Saul spared but Samuel killed. He says it plainly: there is no

way that I will as a Jew bow for Haman, the Agagite. Whatever the consequences, this goes against my conscience! Mordechai obviously was not afraid of revealing his own identity.

COWARDICE OR CONCERN?

Why did he then tell Esther to conceal her nationality and family background? Because as a girl, and even a extra-ordinarily beautiful girl, she ran a special risk of being taken and abused, and if she was known to be a Jew could be treated shamefully and cruelly. Mordechai was no coward; his love and deep concern for Esther lead him to forbid her to tell anyone that she is Jewish. Perhaps Mordechai took into account also the Amalekite presence and influence at the imperial court.

This concern is seen further in two places. In verse 11 we read that every day Mordechai walked back and forth near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was doing and what was happening to her. This was not without danger. The guards will have noticed him and wondered why this fellow was constantly loitering near the royal harem! Some kind of pervert, perhaps, or one who was trying to get into the harem? One could get arrested for such suspicious actions.

In verse 19 we read that Mordechai later took up a vigil in the king's gate. This was, perhaps, because in the second round of selection ("the virgins were assembled second time", verse 19) the women were brought directly into the king's palace. It is very clear that he risks his own life to do what he can for Esther. This man was no coward at all! He is presented as a courageous and principled man, who is not at all afraid to show his Jewish nationality. This means also that Mordechai was a man who believed in the LORD, and trusted in him. He is presented as a man who is prepared for the task that awaits him.

ESTHER INTRODUCED

What does this chapter tell us about Esther? How is she introduced? She is described in verse 7 as a girl "lovely in form and features". She was in every respect a very beautiful woman, and this will have been an important factor in the selection process, at least in the beginning of that process. For Esther is not chosen only because she happens to be beautiful.

For her outward beauty is combined with inner strength. When she is taken to the harem -would you not think, against her will?- she does not make a scene or seek special favours, but her beauty and poise are *noticed* by Hegai the chief keeper of the harem. He saw that this girl was different, one who showed character and class above the others.

We are specifically told in verse 10 that Esther does not reveal her nationality to the harem keepers. Only women of truly Persian aristocratic background could be queen. Had she told that she was Jewish maiden named Hadassah, some explainers write, she would have immediately been disqualified from being

queen, and relegated at most to the status of concubine. This is what probably happened to all those who were not chosen.

Esther realizes: it is queen or nothing! A concubine is virtually a slave, who may provide the king with sexual favours and even bear him children, but she has no status. Esther goes to the harem, but listens to the wise counsel of Mordechai. Esther is wise enough to accept her father's wisdom and obey his wish not to make her Jewish identity known.

WISDOM AND INSIGHT

Another important element is passed on in verse 15 that presents Esther as being equipped for the task that the LORD has in store for her. She does not depend on outward things for her success. It says that when her turn came to go to the king, "she asked for nothing than what Hegai...suggested". Hegai, the keeper of the harem, knows what the king likes. He also knows what the concubines need to please the king. Some of these women resorted to any means to gain the king's favour. But Esther leaves it up to Hegai. He knows best.

Again we see here her wisdom and insight. If she cannot win the king with her natural beauty and her godly personality, he is not worthy of her. Notice how she does not present herself as a sex-object, who will do anything to gain royal status, but as a woman with modest pride and poise! If the LORD wants her to be queen, so be it. She will go with God's gifts, not with Persia's glamour.

These are people who have been prepared by the LORD for the task that awaits. And we know it is a great task: the deliverance and salvation of Israel! They also conduct themselves in an honourable manner. There is no worldly dependance on human schemes. They act in accordance with their faith. They go their way quietly. Even when faced with a deeply degrading and utterly pagan way of imperial selection, they go their way carefully, trusting in the LORD to guide and deliver them. They do not act foolishly but are wise as serpents and innocent as doves.

We see in their lives what our Lord Jesus later told his disciples about the manner in which the church is to conduct itself in the last days, during the final advent. Use your head, maximize your gifts, follow proper opportunities, but never compromise your faith, follow Christ and trust in God. Then you will be able to come through many amazing situations, even deep trials. As did Esther and Mordechai who were faced with a very serious situation but came through it in grand style.

SOVEREIGN GRACE MANIFEST

This is not their own doing. God's sovereign grace is manifest in their lives for the sake of his people. They are involved completely and fully. They must make decisions and abide by rules. Following God's wisdom, they also use common sense. But their trust was always in their God. They conduct themselves

honourably and wisely in the acceptance of their task. They do not know where all this will lead them. The hiding of the Jewish nationality in this selection process could have, if discovered, led to their deaths. But they leave that in the LORD's hand: he must bless their method and plan. They do what they understand to be the best, for they seek not their glory but the salvation of the people of God. That is why this book is in the Bible and is fully canonical. It gives us direction for our lives, how we should live, trust and obey in the service of the Lord as we await the coming of his kingdom.

This is evidenced by the fact that they are blessed by the LORD. God does not bless those who do wrong, or who are only out for their own benefit and glory. He blesses those who serve him, trust in him, and seek him truly in great humility. God grants grace to all who look upon him, as we find in Psalm 123, as slave looks to his master, until God provides them grace. But if our intent is evil and self-seeking, we should not ask God to bless. Psalm 66: if I had cherished any evil, the LORD would not have heeded me (*Book of Praise*). God truly blesses only those whose plans coincide with his will.

A LOVE STORY?

I want to point to two aspects of the LORD's blessing given for the fulfilment of their task. Probably against all odds, Esther was selected from the many virgins that were assembled. Humanly speaking, what are the possibilities of winning a beauty contest, when there are undoubtedly so many bright and beautiful women? Who will officially become queen of Persia with all the rights and privileges of that position? What is it that will attract Xerxes to Esther?

It says in verse 17: now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his approval more than any of the other virgins. Why? Shall we here speak of love, of true love? Is this a love story? Hardly, I'd say.

One commentator, who must have had a lot of time on his hands, figured out by following certain mathematical equations that before Esther came to the king, he must have "cavorted with over 1000 virgins". Is such a man capable of true "love"?

In any case, the king is now smitten hard, and we read that he put a royal crown on her head and officially made her queen. It was a marriage ceremony marked by a great banquet and the day became an important holiday throughout the provinces of the empire.

THE BLESSING OF THE LORD

This is the blessing of the LORD. He gives Esther this exalted position. He moves the heart of the king to act favourably and honourably towards her. And when she has the position of queen, she is accorded all the royal status and privileges of her position by the laws of the Medes and the Persians, and whoever seeks to harm her, will be immediately executed! We read later how serious this

is, when Haman, the Agagite, is accused by Esther, and the king is enraged and leaves the room (7:7). When he returns he finds Haman pleading on the couch with Esther for his life, and the king says, “Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?” Then the guards immediately took Haman away and executed him.

Esther is not shamed, but she is blessed. To be a concubine, a play-thing of Xerxes would have been a shameful matter for a daughter of Zion. To be queen of Persia, for the sake of Israel, is God’s sovereign grace, his unmerited blessing. Being queen of Persia will not have been pleasant in every way for this Jewish girl, but being called by the LORD to save Israel is certainly the greatest blessing in her life. She will have discovered this more and more as time went on.

A PLOT UNCOVERED

And what about Mordechai? We read in this chapter yet how he, too, was blessed by the LORD. He had to be as close to Esther as he could, and so he took up a station in the king’s gate, a place of much traffic, business, and government matters. Sitting in the king’s gate constantly, gave him the opportunity to observe whatever was going on.

Mordechai uncovers a plot to assassinate king Xerxes. One commentator calls these verses “a footnote”, but that is not a right conclusion. It fits in the line of God’s counsel and providence. Here, too, his sovereign grace is manifested. Mordechai hears about this plot. Some explainers suggest (as the NIV notes) that the would-be assassins were supporters of the former queen Vashti. Then this conspiracy directly endangers the life of Queen Esther. This is an interesting but unproven thought. We are not told how Mordechai found out what was being planned. This is not a detective story and Mordechai is not Sherlock Holmes. The LORD leads things so that Mordechai discovers this plot. It is the doing of the LORD!

Of course, it was dangerous for Mordechai to have this information. How could he pass this on to the king? Notice how it says: he told queen Esther, who in turn told the king, giving credit to Mordechai. An official investigation confirmed Esther’s report. The two conspiring officials were promptly hanged. Esther’s position was consolidated, and she won the admiration and trust of the king even more.

The event was of enough importance to be entered into the official chronicles of the kings of Persia. After all, the king’s life had been saved by Mordechai and Esther. This makes Esther’s position with the king even more secure, and introduces Mordechai into the circle of those under royal protection. We may see here the wondrous ways of the LORD.

This is certainly the blessing of God. He is preparing to thwart the evil plan of Haman, the Agagite, and to deliver his people. The Persian empire which had allowed the exiles to return will until the end of its existence serve to protect Israel! Even through a Jewish girl who became queen of Persia.

IN THE SERVICE OF GOD'S KINGDOM

There are undoubtedly human elements here which are not exemplary. It is not common in our society that royalty would be allowed to do what Xerxes did then. This selection process is abhorrent. Who would give up his daughter for such a thing? But that was how it went in those days. Xerxes did what he wanted; Mordechai could not oppose it. But the LORD uses the existing culture and customs of the day to realize his plan of salvation, and so he blesses Esther and Mordechai. They will not be used for Persia's glory, but for the glory of God. His kingdom alone will stand forever.

We live in a different time. As we progress in time, things will not always be easy for God's people. But the Lord will protect and guide. Even the culture of today is subject to counsel of God. His sovereign grace is over all who serve him truly, and all things must serve the benefit of his children. In everything, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us! We have a glorious King who is above all, the Son of David, the son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, and he will bless us till the end of days. Seeing what he has done in the past, we can be confident of what will happen in the future. Christ is king! His kingdom is an eternal kingdom, and he cannot be without subjects (*Article 27, Belgic Confession*).

It is amazing that out of this evil world Christ still gathers, defends, and preserves his churches ways are wondrous. They are to be adored. Also in our lives. All who trust in him will never be put to shame.