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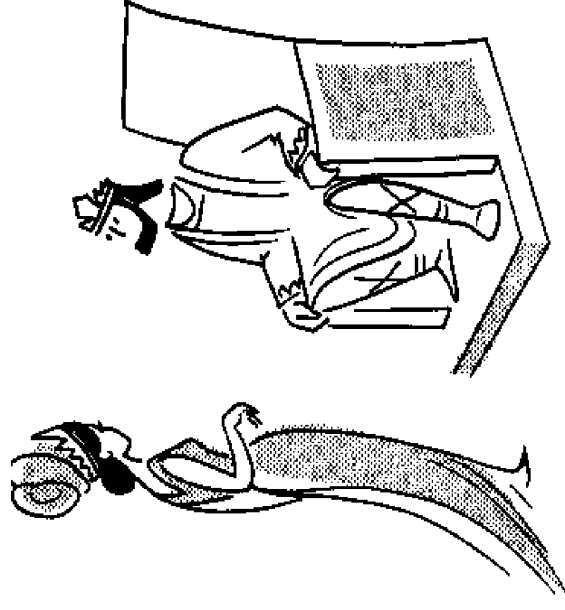
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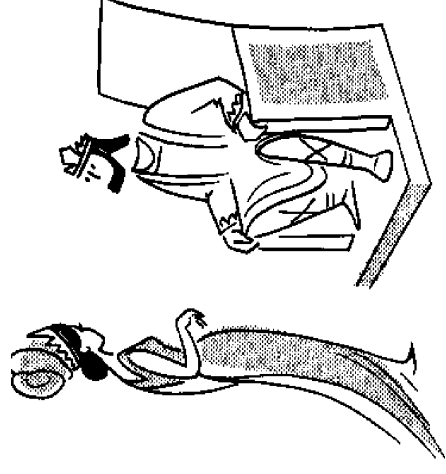
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A Date with Destiny



A Date with Destiny

by Brian Johnston



All Scripture quotes are taken from the New International Version, unless otherwise stated.

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Haman. Surely Esther and Mordecai are satisfied. But no, Esther has a further request to ask of the king:

"If it pleases the king, " Esther answered, "give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on gallows."

So the king commanded that this be done. An edict was issued in Susa, and they hanged the ten sons of Haman. The Jews in Susa came together on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar, and they put to death in Susa three hundred men, but they did not lay their hands on the plunder. (Esther 9:13-15)

Esther was ensuring a complete victory! We've been applying lessons about seeking God's help to preserve our lives in his service - we can never fall away from our salvation; but it's

possible for us to fall away from serving God according to his will and in the way that gives him pleasure. We've also been thinking about how, as Christians, we shouldn't leave undone things which will later become our undoing - as King Saul did. Rather, we should put to death what God has asked us to put to death: we should mortify the deeds of our sinful nature (Colossians 3:5), and with God's help seek a total victory over the lusts which war against our souls (1 Peter 2:11). Not that we'll ever reach sinless perfection this side of heaven, but it's God's purpose for our lives that we live in the fullness of the victory the Lord Jesus gained for us through his death on the cross. May God preserve our lives here for his own glory and purpose!

1. Preparing to meet the king

The story of Esther is one of the most remarkable stories in the Bible. It has all the intrigue and as many twists as a modern thriller. Dark forces of evil, in opposition to the good, swirl around the lead character. She's a girl who is claimed by some Jewish sources to have been one of the four most beautiful women in the Bible. Others have classed the whole drama as a rags to riches, or even a peasant to princess, type of adventure. One thing's for sure: the Jewish girl Hadassah has more than a date with the king: it's a date with destiny. The stakes are high: the future of an entire nation hangs in the balance!

A curious feature of the book, which is often commented upon, is that it lacks any direct mention of God. I'm told that in the original Hebrew the word for God can be found in acrostic form in the text; but in reality we hardly need to go to such lengths to find clear evidence of God's hand in the story that unfolds in this Bible book. We're left with every reason to believe that everything that happened was the design of divine Providence.

Although this book is a fascinating read for all ages, as well as being a

favourite in Sunday Schools, I'd like to encourage us to read between the lines of the book of Esther. You certainly get the unmistakable impression that a sense of destiny is interwoven throughout all the varied circumstances by which Esther progresses. At first she's orphaned, then adopted, then she's selected for - and finally chosen by - the king of Persia to be his new queen. There may have been a thousand other contestants! Why was Esther chosen from an ethnic minority grouping across the vast Persian Empire? Was it mere chance? Was it simply because she was the most beautiful? Or was this her date with destiny? We're told that this last idea was her cousin's understanding of what was happening.

It's my hope that as we explore this together, we'll be encouraged to reflect on how the hand of God is at work in the circumstances of our own lives. That's something even more thrilling than the book of Esther itself!

The story, as we'll see it unfold, is one in which Esther is enabled to find favour with the king (she pleases him) and then goes on to use that favour to achieve God's purpose for

her people. Every believer on the Lord Jesus is in a position to recognize the grace (favour) God has already shown them and then, like the boy Jesus, to go on to *increase in favour with God* - the God who is the 'king eternal' (Luke 2:52; see 2 Peter 3:18; 1 Timothy 1:17). Was that promotion at work or that successful relocation purely down to our own efforts - or do we begin to sense the hand of God behind which there's a smiling Providence? If so, then the lesson of Esther is that we must prepare our hearts to discover the purpose towards which God is working in our lives. (None of this denies the fact that things may appear to go wrong in lives that please the Lord. Think of the extreme case of Job in the Bible. But that's beyond the scope of this short booklet).

Without any further comment, let's launch ourselves into the story of Esther. We'll break in at chapter two - just pausing to say that chapter one has been a scene-setter explaining how the Persian king's queen, Vashti, had fallen into disfavour. The king has now had time to reflect ...

... *when the anger of King Xerxes had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what he had decreed about her. Then the king's personal attendants proposed " ... Let the king appoint commissioners in every province of his realm to bring ... beautiful girls into the harem at the citadel of Susa.*

Let them be placed under the care of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let beauty treatments be given to them. Then let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This advice appealed to the king, and he followed it.

Now there was in the citadel of Susa a Jew of the tribe of Benjamin, named Mordecai ... who had been carried into exile from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon ... Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. The girl pleased him and won his favour. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem. ...

Before a girl's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with

plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. (Esther 8:1-3)

It's interesting that Haman is described as an Agagite. It raises the possibility that this man was a descendant from the Amalekite king of that name, King Agag, whose life Saul had at first spared when he'd really been commanded to destroy all the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15:3). It could be that Queen Esther is finishing off the job that King Saul had signally failed to do - and which, as a result of Saul not doing it, had brought the future of the Jewish people into real jeopardy at this time. Of one thing we can be sure: it's the things we leave undone, that often become our own undoing. Let's take that lesson to heart!

As we've said Haman's plan lived on. A command in the king's name had been issued to destroy all the Jews, and according to Persian custom any command in the king's name could not be changed once it had been issued. What could be done? Esther proposes a solution by asking the king to issue a second edict or command:

"If it pleases the king," she said, "and if he regards me with favour and thinks it the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the king's provinces ..." King Xerxes replied, "... write another decree in the king's name on behalf of

the Jews as seems best to you, and seal it with the king's signet ring - for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked." ...

The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill and annihilate any armed force of any nationality or province that might attack them and their women and children; and to plunder the property of their enemies ... (Esther 8:5-11)

So Haman's command which had also been in the king's name couldn't be withdrawn or suspended, but a second command could be given also in the king's name which gave the Jews the right to self-defence - and with the encouragement of the king's command behind them now, they certainly did that, as we read...

On the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, the edict commanded by the king was to be carried out. On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them. The Jews assembled in their cities in all the provinces of King Xerxes to attack those seeking their destruction. No-one could stand against them ... (Esther 9:1,2)

At this point the Jews were safe; they had gained the victory over their enemies. In the citadel of Susa alone, the Jews had killed and destroyed five hundred men and the ten sons of

the word left the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.

Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king." The king said, "Hang him on it!"

So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the king's fury subsided. (Esther 7:5-10)

Haman had over-reached himself. He'd tried to engineer the death of Mordecai on these gallows, but instead he'd sealed his own fate. There's a very wonderful parallel here. The enemy of God, Satan, put it into Judas' heart to betray Jesus to the authorities so that he might suffer death on a cross. But the Bible tells us that the God whose hand we see at work in the book of Esther was also at work in the great drama of the cross. The Bible tells us that Jesus was "... delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, [and the apostle Peter says to the Jews at that time] you nailed [Him] to a cross by the hands of godless men and put Him to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power." (Acts 2:23,24)

According to later in the Bible, this predetermined plan of God was ... *that through death [Jesus] might*

render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. (Hebrews 2:14,15)

Just as they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai - turning his own weapon against him - so Satan, by having Jesus betrayed and so put to death, actually sealed his own fate, because by that death on the cross 2,000 years ago Jesus rendered powerless the Devil and the very power of death itself for all who believe on him. Satan's own weapon of death was turned against him to defeat him!

However, back in the story of Esther, Haman has been put to death on his own gallows, but his plan still lives on because it had had the king's unchangeable seal of approval at the time. There's still work for Esther to do as we see as we read on ...

That same day King Xerxes gave Queen Esther the estate of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came into the presence of the king, for Esther had told how he was related to her.

The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai. And Esther appointed him over Haman's estate.

Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil

perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king:

Anything she wanted was given to her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. (Esther 2:1-13)

So far we've discovered that this Jewess, Esther (or Hadassah to call her by her Jewish name) had been orphaned and then adopted, and now has been forcibly selected as a candidate in the contest to find the next queen of Persia. At first reading that selection might seem to have a kind of fairy-tale glamour about it, but in reality it must have been very far from that. True, they probably received clothes, jewellery and perfumes to which they would otherwise never had access - 'anything she wanted', the Bible says; but out of the possibly hundreds of girls only one would be chosen. The others might never see the king again, but they'd hardly be allowed to return to normal life. They would end up being retained in seclusion among the king's concubines. A Greek historian once described Xerxes as tall and handsome, but also as ruthless and jealous - one of the most formidable Persian kings.

For one night with such a king - whom many of these girls had probably never seen before - each of them spent a full year in preparation. The twelve months of beauty treatments consisted of six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes. In our western culture

perfume is splashed on in just a few moments. Obviously things were a bit different here! It appears Persian women placed various scented oils on cosmetic coal-burners in order to perfume their skin and clothing. They would crouch over the burner with a robe draped over them like a tent. Even to this day wealthy Middle Eastern women will lay out their clothes over a latticework suspended over trays of fragrant incense burners. In this way the fragrance saturates their clothes.

Esther's first six months of preparation was with oil of myrrh. Although its smell is agreeable, the meaning of the word - as well as the taste of this substance - is bitter. In keeping with that, it has a definite Bible association with suffering (Mark 15:23) and death (John 19:39), being used as an anaesthetic and also for embalming the dead. These properties might suggest there was an intended element of purification during those six months of being treated with myrrh. In fact, the word used for 'beautification' really means 'rubbing' as in rubbing in the oils as a way of purifying.

Next came six more months of preparation - this time with the perfumes of sweet-smelling spices. So overall it was a kind of bitter-sweet experience, and very extensive.

In western culture at least, our increasingly busy lives can often mean that we skimp on preparation.

Lifestyle pressures make us look for instant results. This point in the story of Esther - where she prepares for twelve months for what in the first instance is only one night with the king - helps to challenge this. One thing led to another as God's purpose unfolded, and one day Esther would be able to look back on those twelve months as being time well spent. Esther was caught up in God's amazing plan for her life. Her first meeting with the king was a critical part of that plan, and so the time laid down as required preparation wasn't wasted. Does it make us think about how little attention we give to important things - perhaps because of time wasted on things that in the long run are not important - things outside of God's purpose for our lives? As Christians, our whole life is our preparation for the moment when we meet the King of kings, the Lord Jesus. Do we give enough attention to that? As we prepare for that, and as our lives please him, God will be working out his purpose in our lives at the same time. But how do we prepare

ourselves?

The Bible tells us to: *lay aside the old self, which is being corrupted in accordance with the lusts of deceit; ... and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth* (Ephesians 4:22-24 NASB). Perhaps considering our body as dead to sin (Colossians 3:5; Romans 6:6,11) and mortifying its deeds (Romans 8:13) finds its parallel in the purifying with the bitter myrrh (with its association with death); and perhaps our displaying more and more the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ (2 Corinthians 2:14; Ephesians 5:1,2) finds its parallel in Esther's preparation with sweet fragrances. This is to be our lifelong preparation - as Christians - for our meeting with the King, if we're not to be ashamed before him at his coming (1 John 2:28). The hope of our meeting with the King of kings is to be a purifying hope (1 John 3:3). This is our destiny as believers: our own rags to riches story!

6. A complete victory

The Bible book of Esther is more than a story of palace intrigue, abduction, murder, assassination plots, genocide and impossible romance on the edge of life and death.

One writer has noted that the Nazis banned anyone from reading it in the concentration camps. It's an unforgettable book that demonstrates Jewish resistance to annihilation.

We've now reached the point in the unfolding drama where Queen Esther reveals her Jewish identity and exposes Haman's plan to exterminate the Jews as being a personal attack on her and her people. Esther has waited to choose her moment at the second of two private banquets with the king and Haman, the prime minister:

... the king and Haman went to dine with Queen Esther, and as they were drinking wine on that second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favour with you, O king, and if it pleases your majesty, grant me my life - this is my petition. And spare my people - this is my request." (Esther 7:1-3)

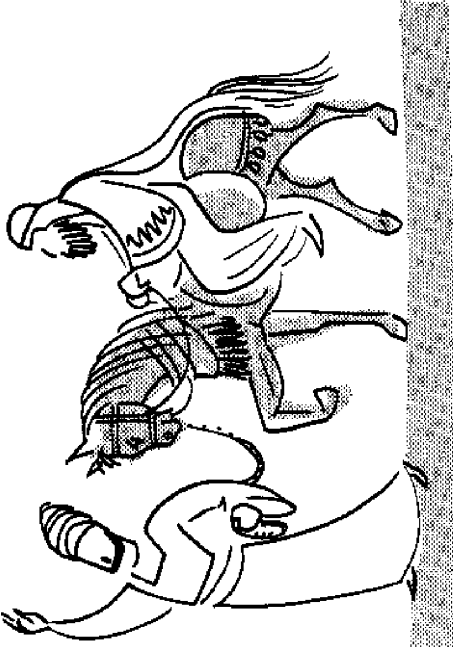
Esther's request was very much to the point; "Grant me my life - this is my petition." My petition is my life, she says! We too, have a great Adversary, the Devil or Satan. And he's out to spoil our lives. He wants to render them useless as far as our serving God is concerned. Thinking about that makes us realize that the most important prayer request we, too, can make to God is that he'll save our life from our great enemy (Matthew 6:13). We long that God will preserve our lives for his service. But before we go any further into that let's first hear King Xerxes' reaction to Esther's startling request:

King Xerxes asked Queen Esther, "Who is he? Where is the man who has dared to do such a thing?"

Esther said, "The adversary and enemy is this vile Haman." Then Haman was terrified before the king and queen.

The king got up in a rage, left his wine and went out into the palace garden. But Haman, realising that the king had already decided his fate, stayed behind to beg Queen Esther for his life. Just as the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet hall, Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was reclining. The king exclaimed, "Will he even molest the queen while she is with me in the house?" As soon as

2. Beauty is more than skin-deep



One gets the impression that a sense of destiny is interwoven throughout all the varied circumstances by which the story of Esther progresses. At first she's orphaned, then adopted, then she's selected for, and, as we'll now see, finally chosen by the king of Persia to be his new queen.

The story as we'll see it unfold is one in which Esther is enabled to please the king and goes on to use that favour with him to achieve God's purpose for her people. Every believer on the Lord Jesus is in a position to please God - to *increase in favour with God* (Luke 2:52; see 2 Peter 3:18) as it's said of the boy Jesus. The more our lives please him, the more God can work out his purpose through them. One of the lessons of the story of Esther is that we need to prepare our hearts to discover how God is wanting to use us.

Let's pick up the story line from where we left off in the previous chapter. We'll recap just a little, to the point where the king's agents are out searching for girls they considered to be suitable candidates of fill the vacant position of Queen of Persia.

Mordecai had a cousin named Hadassah, whom he had brought up

because she had neither father nor mother. This girl, who was also known as Esther, was lovely in form and features, and Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many girls were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. The girl pleased him and won his favour. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven maids selected from the king's palace and moved her and her maids into the best place in the harem.

Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so. Every day he walked to and fro near the courtyard of the harem to find out how Esther was and what was happening to her. (Esther 2:7-20)

Here are the first indications of God's hand arranging things in Esther's favour. No sooner than she's introduced to Hegai, the man in charge of all the contestants, than she finds favour with him. As we'll

to him, "Since Mordecai, before whom your downfall has started, is of Jewish origin, you cannot stand against him - you will surely come to ruin!" While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried Haman away to the banquet. Esther had prepared. (Esther 6:4-14)

Thus we are set up for the great reversal that takes place in the story of Esther: the reversal of Haman's fortunes - the downfall has begun of this great enemy of God's people. From the list of honours Haman at first thought he was putting forward for himself, it could almost seem as though he had ambitions to be king. It might even make us think of Lucifer who wanted to set his throne above God's. In fact that parallel can be extended a bit further as we hope to show in the next chapter.

him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!"

"Go at once," the king commanded Haman. "Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Do not neglect anything you have recommended."

So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honour!"

Afterwards Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered, in grief, and told Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him.

His advisers and his wife Zeresh said

see, that will prove a small, but helpful, step towards finding favour with the king. Because she pleases Hegai, he's prepared to accommodate her special dietary requirements. It's at this point we might make a connection with the story of Daniel who, when he was brought as a captive to Babylon, also found favour, and was able to avoid food about which he as a Jew would have had scruples eating. Presumably, it's something similar here with the Jewess Hadassah when brought into the citadel of Susa. In a sense she was also a captive: she wasn't there of her own free will, but behind the will of the king's agents there was the sovereign will of Almighty God. We've just called her Hadassah, using her Jewish name, but she's best known to us by her Persian name, Esther, of course.

We're told that Esther was also given the best quarters, so that's another advantage. But even though things are going so well, now she's in grand surroundings with seven personal attendants, Esther doesn't suddenly acquire 'airs and graces'. We're told that she didn't reveal her nationality, because she still very much respected her cousin Mordecai's instructions. The words that describe Esther hint at a beauty within as well as describing her physical appearance. Her quiet, submissive spirit is very much part of the beauty God saw in her. The apostle Peter has something to say about this

when in the third chapter of his first letter he writes:

Wives, be submissive to your own husbands so that even if any of them are disobedient to the word, they may be won without a word by the behavior of their wives, as they observe your chaste and respectful behavior. Your adornment must not be merely external - braiding the hair, and wearing gold jewelry, or putting on dresses; but let it be the hidden person of the heart, with the imperishable quality of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is precious in the sight of God. (1 Peter 3:1-4 NASB)

Esther showed just that kind of respectful behaviour. She had her choice of 'gowns' and jewellery, but her adornment was not limited to externals. Esther's inner beauty of gentle and quiet character already reflected the favour she'd found with God. Now we resume the contest to see who would find favour with the king of Persia:

Before a girl's turn came to go in to King Xerxes, she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics. And this is how she would go to the king: Anything she wanted was given to her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. In the evening she would go there and in the morning return to another part of the harem to the care of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of

said to him, "Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it. Then go with the king to the dinner and be happy." This suggestion delighted Haman, and he had the gallows built. (Esther 5:9,14)

But in a glorious irony of divine providence the very same evening Haman was plotting his revenge against Mordecai; King Xerxes was that very same night pacing the palace floor with royal insomnia, for chapter six opens with the words: *That night [- that night of all nights -] the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had exposed Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's officers who guarded the doorway, who had conspired to assassinate King Xerxes.*

"What honour and recognition has Mordecai received for this?" the king asked. "Nothing has been done for him," his attendants answered. (6:1-3)

What a difference a single night can make! This was no coincidence! No-one but God knows why Mordecai's good deed wasn't rewarded immediately, but historians tell us that King Xerxes was busy warring against the Greeks around the time Esther was crowned queen, so that could have been ground enough for distraction. But in any case we can see the hand of God in all this.

Right now, I just want to pause to remind us all as Christians that we serve a God who never slumbers - a God who records all our service before him, and in his time he will reward us. Almost the last words of the Bible are:

"Behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to render to every man according to what he has done." (Revelation 22:12)

But let's return to where we interrupted the story of Esther. A new day is dawning in the royal palace at Susa ...

The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows he had erected for him. His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court." "Bring him in," the king ordered.

When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?"

Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honour than me?" So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honour, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honour, and lead

bring our difficulties, than before God's throne. But which is more important: the instant relief of unburdening ourselves, or first showing respect for God by appreciating his greatness and the glory of our relationship to him? Is this not how the Lord Jesus has taught us to pray ...

*"Our Father who is in heaven,
Hallowed be Your name.*

Your kingdom come. Your will be done,

On earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread.

And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

*For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever.
Amen."* (Matthew 6:9-13 NASB)

Notice the attention first paid to God's name and kingdom and will, before any mention of our needs – which, of course, God already knows all about. So maybe we can take Esther's action as a reminder to us that we should make sensing God's presence and adoring his greatness our very first focus in prayer.

Whenever we seek his face we want first of all to just enjoy his company. So back to Esther again, as she now entertains the king and Haman who have come as she requested:

As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, "Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

Esther replied, "My petition and my request is this: If the king regards me with favour and if it pleases the king to grant my petition and fulfil my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the banquet. I will prepare for them. Then I will answer the king's question." (Esther 5:6-8)

Once again Esther invites the king for a meal. She wants to spend yet more time in his company before she makes her appeal. I wonder if we can take that as another reminder of how our King wants us to invite his company, and longs for us to have unhurried fellowship with him - instead of our rushing in and out of his presence with a kind of shopping list of our requests. It's in Revelation 3 and 20 he says:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he will sit with Me."

In the story of Esther, she was alone with the king - well not quite alone! Haman, the prime minister was there too! I don't suppose Haman ever considered what he was doing there in those intimate banquets. He was just too full of himself ...

Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai ...

His wife Zeresh and all his friends

the concubines. She would not return to the king unless he was pleased with her and summoned her by name.

When the turn came for Esther (the girl Mordecai had adopted, the daughter of his uncle Abihail) to go to the king, she asked for nothing other than what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the harem, suggested. And Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her. (Esther 2:12-15)

Did you notice how it was that Esther won the favour of all who saw her - including the king especially? It was because she was prepared to accept advice. I think the way it's put in the old Bible language hints that Esther had probably asked for the advice in the first place. That showed her

wisdom, for she was

from very humble circumstances compared to the rarefied atmosphere in which she was now moving. She would have been way out of her depth in all the protocol of the palace. But there was none of the arrogance of thinking she knew best, which I'm sure would have characterized many of the other contestants when they suddenly had a blank chequebook with which

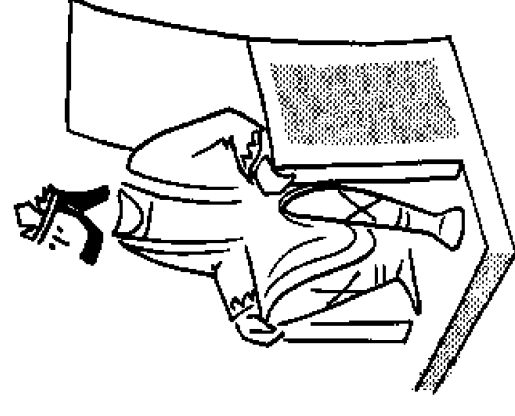
to kit themselves out. Esther was wise to allow herself to be guided by this man. He would certainly know much more about the king's tastes and preferences than Esther did! The Bible book of Proverbs says:

The wise listen and add to their learning

... the discerning get guidance ... but fools despise wisdom and discipline.

(Proverbs 1:5,7)

Esther - wise woman that she was - demonstrates here the characteristic that pleases God: that of being willing to accept advice, and learn from others. There's nothing worse than a 'know-it-all' attitude in someone who simply can't be told. Once again, we're learning from Esther about the things that please God and open up the way for his



purpose to be realized in our lives - just as it was in Esther's. For ...
She was taken to King Xerxes in the royal residence in the tenth month, the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.

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. And the king gave a great banquet, Esther's banquet, for all his nobles and officials. He proclaimed a holiday throughout the provinces and distributed gifts with royal liberality ...

But Esther had kept secret her family background and nationality just as Mordecai had told her to do, for she continued to follow Mordecai's instructions as she had done when he was bringing her up.

This is the most amazing example of the three we're looking at! The newly recognized Queen of Persia continued to follow Mordecai's instructions just as she'd done all the time he had been acting in the role of a father figure in her life. She was certainly fully obeying the spirit of the command: *Honour your father and mother!* (Exodus 20:12). She didn't stop just because she'd been made Queen. This reminds me of something even more amazing, something we read about in Luke's

Gospel about Jesus as a boy. It's the time when he'd stayed behind at the temple without Mary and Joseph's knowledge:

And [the boy Jesus] said to [Mary & Joseph], "Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father's house?"

But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them. And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them; and His mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men. (Luke 2:49-52)

Imagine the Son of God becoming subject to fallible human beings! But this is the way the Holy Spirit leads us to be pleasing to God (Ephesians 5:21). For one of the ways in which it will be evident that we're 'filled with the Spirit' (5:18) will be when we're subject to one another in the fear of Christ. That's something that pleases God too, of course, and by increasing in favour with him - as Esther did with the king - we, too, may expect to find God honouring us, again as Esther was honoured. But let's learn from Esther that the benefits are not for us merely to indulge ourselves with, but for us to reinvest in reaching our appointed destiny.

5. What a difference a night makes!

From the Bible book of Esther we're discovering why God has been pleased to oversee Esther's amazing rise to the position of being the queen of King Xerxes, ruler over the Persian Empire four centuries before Christ. Esther's identity is still secret, but her people, the Jews, are doomed unless she can influence the king. So far so good: Esther has survived a daring breach of royal protocol by arriving uninvited in the king's presence. As soon as she knew the king had favoured her - by granting her an audience - we might think Esther would get straight to the point. After all, the stakes were so high: the lives of all her people are hanging in the balance. But Esther didn't immediately blurt out the problem that troubled her so much. No, when ... *the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you."*

"If it pleases the king," replied Esther, "let the king, together with Haman, come today to a banquet I have prepared for him."

"Bring Haman at once," the king said, "so that we may do what Esther asks." So the king and Haman went to the banquet Esther had prepared. (Esther 5:3-5)

Half the kingdom of Persia was a generous offer! When Alexander the Great finally conquered Persia and entered Susa perhaps a hundred years later, he was dazzled by all the wealth he found. It was reported at 1200 tons of gold and silver bullion along with 270 tons of minted gold coins accumulated by the Persian kings! But Esther wasn't a gold-digger.

From what we've learnt of her and her purpose, we're probably prepared for Esther to reject the offer of half the kingdom, but all she requests instead is the king's company! She requested the king's company, along with Haman, his prime minister, at a special meal she was going to prepare. We might have expected her straightaway to beg for the deliverance of her people who were ensnared in the prime minister's evil plot against them. But no, she didn't. What restraint she showed by not immediately presenting her problem!

When we enter into God's presence in prayer, do we perhaps struggle with the tendency to immediately pour out our requests, detailing all our problems, and maybe those injustices done against us? Of course, there's nowhere better to

Lord Jesus Christ, at that very moment we receive his righteousness - his perfect standing before the throne. Clothed in his righteousness we become 'accepted in the Beloved' (Ephesians 1:6 NKJV).

I was recently thinking how it's even more wonderful than that. Not only do we have Christ's own righteousness given to us to make us acceptable to God (acceptable in that we become as righteous as Christ is himself!), but we also have his preciousness given to us! The apostle Peter tells us this in First Peter 2 verse 7:

To you therefore that believe is the preciousness.

So we're as precious to God as Jesus is! The preciousness of Jesus in the eyes of his Father has been given (or imputed) to us just as his righteous standing before God has been given

to us. This is the glory of the Gospel of God's grace!

Think once more of Esther bringing Mordecai's appeal before the king. Unlike Mordecai and Esther we no longer have any fear of entering God's presence at any time with our prayer requests; nor need we feel anything other than boldness to come before heaven's eternal King as part of a worshipping people. But let's be reminded that that's an amazing privilege, secured for us through our Lord Jesus.

Did he not say to disciples who remain in him: *"So that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you"* (John 15:16). Praise God we have a permanent entrée by faith, and the name and person of Jesus is our golden sceptre which grants the acceptance of our requests!

3. Esther's finest hour!

We're looking at the fascinating Bible book of Esther. It traces how an orphaned Jewess gained access to the throne-room of a violent and pagan world-empire. We've seen how she found favour with the king - Xerxes - of Persia, so much so that he chose her as his queen. Why Esther should be favoured in this way is an interesting question. She was evidently a very beautiful young woman and that at least ensured she qualified for the selection process when Xerxes was choosing his next queen. Yet as we read the Bible story more carefully, it comes across to us that Esther had an inner character which was beautiful in the sight of God. We've discovered she was patient and humble, with a teachable, submissive spirit; and God was very definitely at work in her life. God had designs on this young woman's life. Esther found favour with King Xerxes because she found favour with God. Our interest in this study is to observe how it was that Esther obtained that favour, so that we, too, can please the God who is himself the great King of the Ages. In chapters 3 and 4 of the book of Esther the story takes a dramatic turn. Destiny beckons for Esther. We are about to relive a life-and-death struggle at the heart of the Persian royal court, four centuries before Christ. We're about to discover why

God has been pleased to oversee Esther's rise to royal position in the mighty Persian Empire. History would seemingly indicate that King Xerxes had personally led his troops into a disappointing invasion of Greece immediately after his marriage to Queen Esther. Some time went by before he returned to his palace at Susa. Perhaps the king's absence paved the way for one man to accumulate incredible power and influence. Chapter 3 tells us about him ...

After these events, King Xerxes honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles. All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour.

Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behaviour would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.

When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him

honour, he was enraged. Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes ...

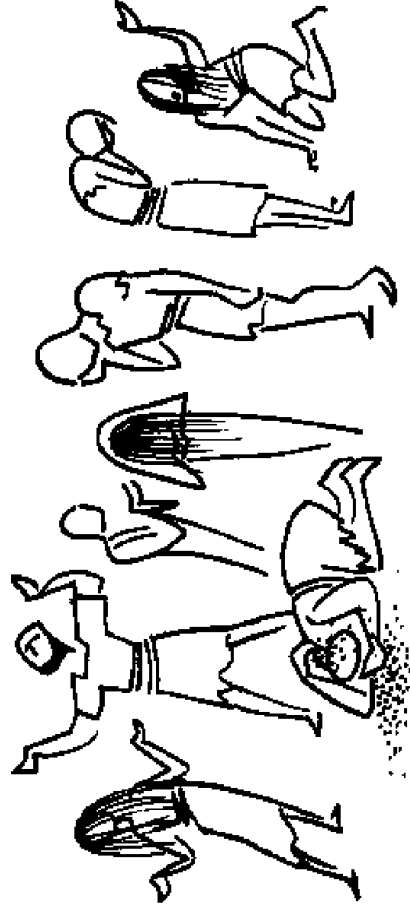
Then Haman said to King Xerxes, "There is a certain people dispersed and scattered among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom whose customs are different from those of all other people and who do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will put ten thousand talents of silver into the royal treasury for the men who carry out this business."

So the king took his signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews. "Keep the money," the king said to Haman, "and do with the people as you please." (Esther 3:1-11)

Sadly there's nothing new about so-called ethnic cleansing. Haman had just succeeded in getting the king to authorize the extermination of the Jewish people. The only weapon in the arsenal of the Jewish people was the secret connection they had to the king. For what Haman hadn't bargained for was that he'd just plotted against the king's bride. But Mordecai could take nothing for granted ...

When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly. But he went only as far as the king's gate, because no-one clothed in sackcloth was allowed to enter it. In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes. ...

Then Esther summoned [an attendant] ... to find out what was



and limited access into the inner sanctum of God's earthly house was as a result of the holiness of God. What a contrast all this is with the great news God has for us in the New Testament! It's not that God's changed; that's impossible. The difference is down to the work which God's Son, Jesus Christ, has done for us. He came and died as a sacrifice upon the cross so that you and I might be justified - just-as-if-I'd never sinned. In Romans chapter 5, the apostle Paul says:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand (vv. 1,2 NKJV).

Notice, will you, the word 'access': the access to God which believers enjoy. Again, in writing to the church of God at Ephesus, Paul addressed Gentiles whom he described as being 'afar off' from God, as well as addressing Jews whom he described as near, and he spoke of how Jesus Christ ... *came and preached peace to you who were afar off, and to those who were near. For through him we both [Gentiles and Jews now] have access by one Spirit to the Father.* (Ephesians 2:17,18 NKJV)

That's the same word 'access' again. Then, in the next chapter he says ... *Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through faith in Him.* (Ephesians 3:11,12 NKJV)

I'm sure you've previously noticed the repetition of the word 'access' in all these verses - but these are the only places in the New Testament where we find this word 'access': it's a word meaning 'approach' or 'introduction' - perhaps best summed up by the French word 'entrée'.

Originally, the Bible word 'access' referred to the act of a person who secured an interview with a king on behalf of someone else. In the first place the person who secured the interview would himself need to be close to the king. Now as the apostle Paul uses it these three times in the Bible, the person who acts for us to allow us access to God the Father is, of course, the Lord Jesus. Since he occupies the closest place in the Father's affections as God's own well-beloved Son, he's ideally fitted for this task on our behalf.

There was also a second idea in this Bible word 'access'. The person for whom the access or entrée to the king has been gained must himself - or herself - be acceptable to the king. That, of course, is what the Lord Jesus did for us through the blood of his cross where he put away our sin by the sacrifice of himself. He took our sin and he gave us his righteousness! That's the wonderful exchange which is at the very heart of God's Good News for each one of us. That exchange of our sin for his righteousness becomes effective only when we put our trust in God's Son, Jesus Christ. When we believe on the

replied: "Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13,14)

Hers was a dangerous destiny. The Persian royal palace at Susa, in modern south-west Iran, was not a safe place for anyone. Even kings were paranoid of would-be assassins. We can be pretty sure that's why uninvited access to the king was so strictly controlled at peril of death. So there seemed to be danger on all sides for Esther: Haman was the highly placed enemy of her people, but also no place was more dangerous than being on the wrong side of the king. But Esther made up her mind: she would go to the king. First she prepared herself by entering the court of heaven's King through fasting and (we can safely assume) through prayer. Then she took her first steps towards entering uninvited into the king's inner court. There's a palpable sense of tension as we turn to chapter five of the book of Esther ...

On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the palace, in front of the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne in the hall, facing the entrance. When he saw Queen

Esther standing in the court, he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther approached and touched the tip of the sceptre.

Then the king asked, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you." (Esther 5:1-3)

The only way in which the death sentence could be over-ruled was if the king held out the golden sceptre. What a tremendous relief it must have been for Esther - to see that sceptre being extended towards her. It was the sign that she'd been accepted! She'd survived her life-and-death encounter with the king!

In a way I'm reminded of God's instructions to the Israelites long before in the days of Moses. To Moses he'd said, "No man can see Me and live" (Exodus 33:20); and to Aaron, Moses' brother, and the high priest, God said that once a year: "He shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring it inside the veil. He shall put the incense on the fire before the LORD, that the cloud of incense may cover the mercy seat that is on the ark of the testimony, otherwise he will die." (Leviticus 16:12,13)

The danger involved in Esther's journey into the king's inner sanctum was down to fickleness of human character, but the danger for Israel's high priest in that carefully regulated

troubling Mordecai and why. ...

Mordecai told him everything ... and he told him to urge [Esther] to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people. (Esther 4:1-8)

Perhaps Mordecai at first thought Esther would be able to gain the king's ear more readily than others, but Esther reminded him, "All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold sceptre to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the king." (Esther 4:11)

But Mordecai was insistent now. He'd not previously asked for Esther's interventional when the matter was personal between him and Haman, but now that the future of the whole nation hung in the balance, he lays it on the line ...

"Do not think that because you are in the king's house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:13-14)

That was some speech, wasn't it?

Winston Churchill, when addressing Britain to prepare it for a critical challenge during the second World War announced, "This is our finest hour!" Like the people of Britain, Esther rose magnificently to the occasion – inspired by the challenge that her finest hour had come. This was her date with destiny!

Then Esther sent this reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will fast as you do. When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." (Esther 4:15-16)

Now it's the turn of Esther to demonstrate her faith in God. She called for a fast. When the Jews abstained from food like this, it was always associated with prayer. They fasted so as to make their voice to be heard on high (Isaiah 58:4). Whenever something was of such concern to them that they were prepared to go without food, they were proving their earnestness in the matter they were bringing before God.

Esther knew the protocol of the king's court. In Persia, no-one could enter the inner court of the king unless they'd been invited - not even the queen. But Esther knew there was a higher court, the court of heaven. It was essential to access the court of heaven by prayer and fasting before attempting to enter

the inner court of the king of Persia. Having brought her petition first within heaven's court through prayer, she was then prepared to go against the law of Persia and enter the king's earthly court with her request to spare of the life of all her people. And she says, "And if I perish, I perish." By any standard these are remarkable words. She could still have entertained the notion that her royal position and secret identity would guarantee her personal safety despite Mordecai's warnings. But she chose to resign any possible rights of her own, and side with her people in order to intercede boldly for them.

This reminds me of something I've just been reading from Mark's Gospel chapter 8 about Jesus when he began to teach the disciples *that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again*. It was then that one of his disciples, Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him. But Jesus rebuked Peter and said "Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests; but man's." That was the occasion when he went on to speak about Christian discipleship in a very challenging way: "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take

up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it." (Mark 8:31-35 NASB).

If Esther had not been prepared to put her life on the line, she would not have fulfilled the purpose for which God had been preparing her. In those tense scenes at the palace, Esther accepted she'd been favoured for a purpose. True, she'd pleased God, and he'd promoted her, but it was so that she might reinvest her earthly influence to do the will of heaven. And what about us? God has blessed us in every way spiritually, but to the extent he's also blessed us materially or advanced us to any position of influence, should we not consider his purpose in this? If we're prepared to make it a matter of earnest prayer, and if we're ready to 'lose our life for His sake' – in other words, if we, too, are prepared to put God's interests before our own interests, then who knows what will be the outcome of our life in the perspective of eternity? Mordecai pleaded with Esther not to 'remain silent'. If there's something we, too, are in a position to speak out about - in testimony for the Lord and about what's right - then let's be encouraged to do it even if it will mean loss of face or risking our reputation.

4. Accepted by the king!

The Bible book of Esther traces how an orphaned Jewess gained access to the throne-room of the Persian Empire under King Xerxes. We're about to discover why God's been pleased to oversee Esther's amazing rise to the position of being Xerxes' queen. Esther's people, the Jews, are doomed unless she can influence the king – but just getting safe access to him is far from guaranteed even to his queen!

Historians say Xerxes became so angry when a storm once delayed the completion of a bridge during his Greek wars that he beheaded the men building it! If it's true that instability like that directed the vast power that was at his disposal, then Esther had every reason to fear for her own safety even though she was his queen! Esther had been queen for over a year by this time (Esther 3:7) and she'd now be familiar with the palace protocols. Remember she'd reminded Mordecai:

"All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold sceptre to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go

to the king." (Esther 4:11)

It's likely that Esther could never be sure of her husband's state of mind. From sources outside the Bible we're told Xerxes was tall and handsome, but also violent and ruthless. Around the time Esther had been crowned queen, Xerxes had launched a major war against the Greeks (480 BC). Despite the king's personal leadership, the invasion had been disappointing. Memories of the Greek wars - and especially his humiliating defeat at the Bay of Salamis - could well have been preying on his mind. Apparently, the king had actually been sitting overlooking the bay, watching as his navy was surrounded and defeated before his eyes. Reversals like that would naturally have had a big influence on the king's mood. Whatever the reason at this particular time, Esther hadn't been summoned into the king's presence for a whole month. To go in now - uninvited - was courting danger. Maybe thoughts of her predecessor, Queen Vashti, passed through her mind. Vashti had offended the king by refusing to come to him when invited; now Esther was considering going to the king uninvited - that, too, could prove to be a fatal mistake.

Despite her misgivings, Mordecai - whose advice she followed - had