

V. The Plan of Esther, 5:1-8

A. Coquetry

TEXT: 5:1-4

- 1 Now it came to pass on the third day, that Esther put on her royal apparel, and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house: and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the entrance of the house.
- 2 And it was so, when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, that she obtained favor in his sight; and the king held out to Esther the golden sceptre that was in his hand. So Esther drew near, and touched the top of the sceptre.
- 3 Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be given thee even to the half of the kingdom.
- 4 And Esther said, If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.

Today's English Version, 5:1-4

On the third day of her fast Esther put on her royal robes and went and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace, facing the throne room. The king was inside, seated on the royal throne, facing the entrance. When the king saw Queen Esther standing outside, she won his favor, and he held out to her the gold scepter. She then came up and touched the tip of it. "What is it, Queen Esther?" the king asked. "Tell me what you want, and you shall have it—even if it is half my empire."

Esther replied, "If it please Your Majesty, I would like you and Haman to be my guests tonight at a banquet I am preparing for you."

COMMENTS

v. 1-2 *Reception*: On the third day after Esther and Mordecai had communicated, Esther dressed herself in her royal finery and

stood in the inner court of the king's palace. The author of the account has described perfectly the arrangement of the Persian palace. The king's throne is opposite an open doorway leading into the inner court of the palace. Esther was using all her womanly intuition in simply standing so she might be seen by the emperor instead of sending word that she wished an audience with him. Esther was well aware of the fact that no one gained audience with the emperor unless he invited them! Besides, Vashti had recently been deposed because of her precociousness. Oriental men (and especially potentates) did not look favorably upon precocious wives.

But Esther also knew that the emperor had fallen to her beauty before and it had been over thirty days since he had feasted upon her beauty. Knowing male vulnerability as practically all women do, Esther "prettied herself up" and played the coquet. The emperor saw this vision of loveliness. She was irresistible! Immediately he held out the golden sceptre and beckoned her to enter the royal throne room and approach his royal presence and touch the sceptre. Esther has her audience. Now she must tread even more carefully. She must be wise; she must keep her wits; she must not rush or be rash. On the other hand, her task is not one for the weak or the vacillating.

v. 3-4 *Request*: Esther's beauty coupled with the fact that the emperor had not enjoyed her conjugal presence for more than a month, put him in a magnanimous mood. Actually, it was a customary thing with rulers of eastern empires to take pride in their generosity. Many Oriental emperors vied with one another in giving fabulous gifts to those who pleased them. It was a "status symbol." To refuse the generosity of such a potentate was a serious insult not usually forgotten or forgiven. Herod, tetrarch of Galilee, 450 years after Xerxes, made a serious mistake promising the sensuous Salome "half" of his "kingdom," (see Mark 6:21-28). Herod's motivation for magnanimity is plainly indicated to be pride (cf. Mk. 6:26); we suspect that Xerxes' motive was similar. It is interesting to note also that the emperor offered to grant Esther's request before she made it. That, too, was the custom of the Oriental ruler. Herodotus (9:3) indicates there was one day in the year on which the Persian emperor was

bound by custom to grant *any* request made by a guest at his table.

Knowing the extreme crisis facing the Jewish people, one would expect Esther to *immediately* and imploringly present her request that the order put forth to slaughter the Jews be rescinded. But amazingly, Esther simply extends an invitation to the emperor and his chief of state, Haman, to a merry-making feast (a *mishetteh*; see 1:7-8). Esther is keeping her wits. She will wait, gain time, be sure that she has fully won her way into the emperor's affections before she springs her trap. Her invitation was very unusual. Ordinarily the emperor and the queen feasted separately (cf. 1:3, 9) each in their own section of the palace. For the queen to invite not only the emperor but another male guest was also highly irregular. Esther sets out to disarm Haman by her cordiality. It worked! Haman was very pleased (cf. 5:9). The Septuagint version of Esther 5:1-4 differs so widely from the Hebrew text we have chosen to give an unbroken translation of the LXX text rather than include the variations as comments.

“And it came to pass on the third day, when she had ceased praying, that she put off her domestic apparel, and put on the glorious things she had. And being splendidly arrayed, and having called upon God the Observer and Savior of all things, she took her two maidens, and she leaned upon one of them, in all her delicate femininity, while the other maiden followed holding the train of her royal robe. She radiated the perfect beauty of youthfulness and cheerfulness and grace, but her heart shrank with fear. And having passed through all the doors, she stood before the king; and he was sitting upon his royal throne, and he had put on all his glorious apparel, covered all over with gold and precious stones; and was very awesome and frightening. And having raised his face to look at Esther with all his majestic mien, he looked with intense anger: and the queen fell, and grew pale and fainted; and she leaned her head against the head of the maiden that accompanied her. But God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in intense feeling he sprang from off his throne, and took her into his arms, until she recovered: and he comforted her with words of peace, and said to her, What is the matter, Esther? I am your brother; be of good cheer, you shall not die for our command is openly declared to you, Draw near. And having raised the golden

sceptre he laid it upon her neck, and embraced her and said, Speak to me. And she said to him, I saw you, my lord as an angel of God, and my heart was troubled for fear of your glory; for you, my lord, are to be wondered at, and your face is full of grace. And while she was speaking, she fainted and fell. Then the king said, What do you wish Esther? and what is your request? ask even to the half of my kingdom, and it shall be yours. And Esther said, Today is my great day: if then it seem good to the king, let both him and Aman come to the feast which I will prepare this day."

A sizeable portion of the Hebrew original of Ecclesiasticus (an apocryphal book) has been discovered. This original Hebrew text, compared with the later Greek version of the LXX, shows that the LXX translator had dealt very freely with his original and had, in the interests of a more Hellenistic viewpoint, taken considerable liberties with the original Hebrew. The Septuagint shows a tendency to be more of a paraphrase of the Hebrew original in many places—especially in the Latter Prophets and Poetic Books. The Jews had an especial charitableness toward the Persians since they freed the Jews, returned them to their homeland and restrained those (Samaritans) who tried to thwart the rebuilding of the Temple. The authors of the LXX would wish to put Xerxes in the best possible light even if they must paraphrase here.

B. Curiosity

TEXT: 5:5-8

- 5 Then the king said; Cause Haman to make haste, that it may be done as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.
- 6 And the king said unto Esther at the banquet of wine, What is thy petition? and it shall be granted thee: and what is thy request? even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed.
- 7 Then answered Esther, and said, My petition and my request is:
- 8 if I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition, and to perform my request, let the king and Haman come to the banquet that I shall prepare for them, and I will do to-morrow as the king hath said.

Today's English Version, 5:5-8

The king then ordered Haman to come quickly, so that they could be Esther's guests. So the king and Haman went to Esther's banquet. Over the wine the king asked her, "Tell me what you want, and you shall have it. I will grant your request, even if you ask for half my empire."

Esther replied, "If your Majesty is kind enough to grant my request, I would like you and Haman to be my guests tomorrow at another banquet that I will prepare for you. At that time I will tell you what I want."

COMMENTS

v. 5-6 *Piqued*: It is evident from the emperor's immediate reaction that his curiosity is aroused. He knew that Esther had not risked her life just to invite him to a banquet! Xerxes insists that Haman *hurry* to the banquet. Esther has again used her female wiles to good advantage. Xerxes can hardly wait to find out Esther's real reason for approaching him. The Hebrew text uses not only the word *mishetteh* (drinking bout, see 1:8-9) but also uses the word *yayin* (wine) to describe Esther's feast. It was a party! Xerxes repeats his grandiose promise of half his kingdom if Esther shall request it.

v. 7-8 *Postponed*: Dangerous as it must have been to keep this impetuous monarch hanging on the hooks of curiosity, Esther postpones a second time the revelation of her real reason for violating the sacred law of the Persians about approaching the emperor uninvited. Esther begins as if she is about to divulge her secret request and then cleverly holds the king in suspense. Some think Esther hesitated to state her request because she was afraid. However, as Mordecai has already convinced her, she has little to lose by pleading with the king since she will perish with all her kinsmen once it is known that she too is a Jew. Esther seems already to have committed herself to making the pleas. She knows that, if she succeeds, one more postponement of her real request

will only intensify the desire of the king to please his queen by granting what must be a very spectacular request from her. He may even be thinking about the glory that will be his once this magnificent request Esther has is fulfilled in his imperial name.

We may learn the following lessons from this chapter:

1. God's providential assistance does not preclude Esther's (and our) best use of human capabilities.
2. Nothing ventured, nothing gained.
3. Although the urgency of some situations might seem to call for haste, if time permits one's first reaction should be postponed.
4. There is nothing like piqued curiosity as a tool for manipulation.

CHAPTER 5:1-8 REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How would Esther know where to position herself to be seen by the king?
2. How might she guess the king would grant her an audience in spite of the Persian law?
3. Why was Xerxes in such a benevolent mood?
4. What kind of banquet did Esther hold for the king?
5. Why didn't Esther state her request immediately?