

ESTHER

For Such A Time As This

by

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CHAPTER FIVE

AN AUDIENCE WITH THE KING

WE ARE SO ACCUSTOMED to arranging interviews by mail or telephone, or through some mutual friend, that all of the details of this chapter may seem to be quite unnecessary and tedious. But we have to remember that here we are in an oriental court. Things were done differently there at that time. Indeed, one does not have to go that far back or that far away to find people who still follow much the same procedure in their regular life. Americans traveling in countries to the south of our own find that the people there have ways of doing things that are quite different from our hasty habits.

The writer well remembers one occasion in Palestine when he wanted to make certain purchases before leaving there for England and home. Not knowing the Arabic language, he was glad to avail himself of the kind services of a Christian lady in Jerusalem who not only knew the language but also the customs of the people. Together we went to the business section of the old city of Jerusalem. There we found exactly what was wanted, and it seemed as though it should take only a few minutes to complete the purchase and be on our way. But I soon discovered that that would not have been the proper thing to do. So we sat down and talked quite leisurely about the business in hand. When we inquired about the price, it seemed to be quite exorbitant. But my friend assured me that that need not disturb me.

After some more talk, the price was reduced to a point where I was quite ready to close the deal. But my friend urged more patience. And while we were discussing the matter, a servant brought in some coffee for us to sip meanwhile. Then, after more bargaining, we finally arrived at the point where all concerned seemed to be quite satisfied. The deal was closed, and we prepared to leave. We were showered with words of thanks and appreciation on the part of the proprietor who appeared to have enjoyed the whole occasion even more than we had.

As we left there that morning, we recalled the story of Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah as recorded in Genesis 23. His wife Sarah had died, and he wanted to buy a place to bury her remains. Under such circumstances it might have seemed proper to dispense with formality. But we find as we read the story that such was not to be the case. Even in a time of sorrow and bereavement, things must be done according to the custom of the country.

And I think that most of us will agree that there are things which must be done in a quiet and deliberate way if we are to derive the greatest possible blessing from them. That that was the case in the matter we are now considering in the Book of Esther is clearly shown in the sequel to this.

If Esther had rushed through this whole affair, she probably would never have achieved her purpose.

Esther's preparation for her audience with the king may also teach us a lesson. For three days she fasted with her maidens. Whether or not she was clothed in sackcloth like the rest of the Jews, we are not told. But that would be not at all unlikely. In any case, we are told that she put on her royal apparel. She knew perfectly well that no one might enter the king's presence dressed in sackcloth. As a matter of fact, she probably had no desire to appear before him that way.

In keeping with his station, as well as her own, she dressed up like a queen. She was going to have an audience with the king. That in itself would indicate the manner in which she should dress. Even though she came as a suppliant, she never lost sight of the fact that it was the king himself who had promoted her to the place of honor she was privileged to occupy at that time.

And should we do less when we come to have an audience with the King of kings? Has He not lifted us as beggars from the dunghill to set us among princes? (See I Samuel 2:8). And has He not provided us with the royal garments of salvation which are suited to His holy presence? (Cf. Matthew 22:12). And therefore we may sing with one of old, **"I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels"** (Isaiah 61:10).

Then notice the gradual way in which Esther approached the royal presence. She took her stand, first of all, **"in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house."** Her visit was well timed. **"The king sat upon his royal throne, over against the gate of the house."** If she had planned for this months in advance, it could not have been more favorably arranged. And is not that another evidence of the providence of God? And even though Ahasuerus be but a heathen king, he may serve us here as an illustration of the One who is always in readiness to receive us when we draw near to His throne.

"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 scepter that was in his hand." It is written, **"The king's wrath is as the roaring of a lion; but his favor is as the dew upon the grass"** (Proverbs 19:12). Esther feared the former, but, by God's grace, she experienced the latter. Those three days of fasting and waiting were not in vain.

It may be thought strange that Esther should chose this method of gaining an audience with the king. After all, she was his wife. But we must not judge her conduct by modern standards, but according to those which were observed in those days. The history of those times confirms the fact that she followed the only course that was open to her. There was no alternative.

Mordecai had not specified how she was to approach the king. She had to work that out herself. But the results prove that she made no mistake. And we may well imagine the relief that was hers as she drew near and touched the top of the extended scepter, undoubted token of the royal favor.

“Then said the king unto her, What wilt thou, queen Esther? and what is thy request? it shall be even given thee to the half of the kingdom.” He sensed immediately that this was something more than a formal call. Nobody could have realized more than he that Esther had actually risked her life in order to secure this brief interview.

Only a matter of grave importance could induce one to do that. By extending his scepter, and in addressing her as queen, he made her doubly sure that he was ready to listen to her request. Note that he does not say, “What have you to tell me?” He was not only in the listening mood, he was in the giving mood. He was ready to grant her request even to the half of his kingdom.

Perhaps we should not take that statement too literally. We have a similar case in the New Testament where Herod promised the daughter of Herodias anything that she might ask of him even to the half of his kingdom. But when she asked for the head of John the Baptist we read that **“the king was exceeding sorry”** (Mark 6:26). That head was worth more than all of his little kingdom. But evidently he never thought of that.

Queen Esther might have asked for the head of Haman right then and there. But the time had not yet come for that. So she simply replies, **“If it seem good unto the king, let the king and Haman come this day unto the banquet that I have prepared for him.”** It is of deep interest to note that she makes this altogether a matter of the king’s pleasure. Haman’s pleasure or convenience was not even mentioned. She had prepared this banquet, not for Haman, but for the king. And the fact that she spoke of the banquet as already prepared is also very interesting.

In view of this, it is difficult to think that there was no faith there. She must have believed that somehow her request would be granted. Oh, that we had similar faith when we come to the Lord with our petitions! And this is the more remarkable because it was only three days before this that she had said, **“If I perish, I perish.”** Evidently those days of fasting were also days of reflection. It takes more than abstinence from food to produce so profound a change as this. And we like to think that even though the Lord is not mentioned by name here, nevertheless, His Holy Spirit was quietly working in the heart and mind of Esther. In contrast to the quiet and deliberate manner of Queen Esther, we hear the king saying, **“Cause Haman to make haste, that he may do as Esther hath said. So the king and Haman came to the banquet that Esther had prepared.”**

Whatever other business the king may have had, all was put to one side in favor of such business as the queen might have. A man in his position could easily have found some good reason for not attending a banquet that day. No doubt matters of state would be awaiting his attention all the time. But once again we see the hand of God clearing the way for His child. All of the affairs of the Persian Empire are only as **“a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance”** (Isaiah 40:15) by **“the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth.”**

And yet He upon whom the universe depends is never too busy to receive us and to hear us as we make known to Him our petitions.

At the banquet again it was the king who took the initiative when he asked Esther, “**What is thy petition?**” And again he repeated the promise that her request would be granted even to the half of his kingdom. But this time all of this took place in the hearing of Haman. Knowing something of the urgency of the matter in hand, we cannot but marvel at the self-restraint of Esther. The king had left the door wide open, so to speak. But her only request just now is that the king and Haman should come to the banquet that she was going to prepare for them on the morrow. At that time she would finally make known her request.

Little did any present at that banquet that day realize how this postponement was going to work to the advantage of Esther. What if she had been in a hurry? When she postponed her request she did better than she knew. Of course, it may be argued that it was nothing but fear that held her back. The request she was to make involved the king’s favorite who was the guest of honor at that banquet. Hatach had brought her the information from Mordecai that “**Haman had promised to pay to the king’s treasuries for the Jews, to destroy them.**”

It is not difficult to imagine how we would feel if we were face to face with one who had plotted to destroy our loved ones. When she thought of the high position he now occupied in the kingdom, it might well make her pause. But if she had any fears she did not manifest them. Wonderful things were to happen within the next few hours which would abundantly justify Esther’s course at this time. But of them she knew nothing at the moment.

Evidently Haman never suspected what was in store for him either. He “**went forth that day joyful and with a glad heart.**” But his joy was soon clouded. When he “**saw Mordecai in the king’s gate, that he stood not up, nor moved for him, he was full of indignation against Mordecai.**” It is indeed amazing that a man of Mordecai’s humble standing should cause so much disturbance.

To all outward appearances he had neither social position nor political power. And yet his attitude toward Haman is the cause of trouble which soon affects hundreds, if not thousands, of others. It may be that Haman saw in him something more than a mere porter at the gate of Ahasuerus.

For some reason or other he may have considered him as one who occupied a key position, as we would say nowadays. And in that respect he may be typical of the Jewish people. Their importance in the world today is out of all proportion to their total number as compared with the population of the world, or even of any particular country. There must be a reason for that.

If the wise men who came from the East when Christ was born had asked, “Where is He that is born king of the Egyptians?” or, “Where is He that is born king of the Grecians?” their question would probably have stirred up but little interest. But when they asked, “**Where is he that is born king of the Jews?**” Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And the flight into Egypt was ordered because Herod sought the young Child to destroy Him. (See Matthew 2:13).

Haman's hatred of Mordecai and his plot to destroy him and his people are just episodes in a program of destruction that began when Cain murdered his brother Abel. That program will find its great climax in the Tribulation when the dragon, that is Satan, makes war with the remnant of Israel with a view to their total annihilation (See Revelation 12:9-17). Of course, we are not suggesting for one moment that Haman was aware of all this. He was but the instrument for the time being of **"that old serpent, the devil,"** who knew full well that out of **"the people of Mordecai"** was to come the One who would seal his doom. As for Haman, we read that he **"refrained himself."** Apparently he never let on as he passed through the gate that day that he had even noticed that Mordecai did not rise up to honor him. After all he was next to the king and it would never do for him to explode in public. Moreover, it would have hampered him greatly in his plan to destroy all the Jews if he had manifested his anger then and there.

Like the one whom he was serving, he was far too astute for that. But to provide himself with an escape from all of this, when he came home **"he sent and called for his friends, and Zeresh his wife, and Haman told them of the glory of his riches, and the multitude of his children, and all the things wherein the king had promoted him, and how he had advanced him above the princes and servants of the king."**

To most of us this would have been quite nauseating. But there are those who can listen to such bombast and actually applaud a man who invites people to a party at his home just to listen to him brag about all that he has. To cap it all, he mentions the fact that Esther the queen had not permitted anyone to attend the banquet that she had prepared that day except himself. And he hastens to add, **"Tomorrow am I invited unto her also with the king."**

But there was just one thing that spoiled it all so far as he was concerned. **"All this availeth me nothing, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate."** It is clear that the emphasis here is on the word **"sitting."** Haman does not go into detail. But it must have been plain to all of his guests that the thing that bothered him was the fact that Mordecai remained seated as Haman passed by. It was more than his pride could take.

"Then said Zeresh his wife and all his friends unto him, Let a gallows be made of fifty cubits high, and tomorrow speak thou unto the king that Mordecai may be hanged thereon: then go thou in merrily with the king unto the banquet."

This ready suggestion so unanimously agreed upon will give us some idea of how cheap human life can be. But there was no thought of disposing of Mordecai quietly. Inasmuch as the Persians did not execute criminals by hanging them, it is thought the word for gallows here should be rendered a pale or a cross. It was by impalement that the Persians punished rebels and traitors in those days. (See Esther 2:23).

The fact that this "gallows" was to be fifty cubits high, or about 75 feet, has led some commentators to believe that there may be some error in the text. Inasmuch as letters were used in place of numbers that would not be impossible. But it might also mean that the pale, or cross, was to be placed in some prominent place, high up so that all might see it.

That such was the case when our blessed Lord was crucified is quite generally held by most Christians, even though the Scriptures do not actually say that it was on “a hill far away.” In any case, it does look as though they would make a public example of Mordecai. No doubt this was calculated to strike terror to the hearts of the rest of the Jews. But so far as Haman was concerned, he could then go in merrily with the king to the banquet. With Mordecai out of the way the main obstacle to his happiness would be eliminated. And no doubt there were those who thought that by crucifying the Lord Jesus they could get rid of Him also. But it has not worked out that way.

Nevertheless, **“the thing pleased Haman; and he caused the gallows to be made.”** Little did he dream that he was really preparing for his own execution. But he is not the only one who will one day discover that his final doom is really one of his own making. Despising the riches of God’s goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, men today treasure up to themselves **“wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds”** (Romans 2:4-6).

~ end of chapter 5 ~

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