

THE HAND OF GOD IS ON THE MOVE!

Esther 2: 1-23 – Pastor Richard P. Carlson

Mordecai must have been 75 to 100 years old when he got to be a daddy all over again. On the day he took Hadassah into his home as an orphan of his uncle and aunt, Hadassah had no other home. This little girl, apparently, born in her parent's very old age, had been given a Hebrew name, Hadassah. Yet her Persian name was Esther, meaning a rising star, the planet star Venus. In the home, this beautiful little girl was probably called Hadassah, but out on the streets of Susa, the capital of Persia, she was Esther. Her daddy who adopted her and took her into his arms and into his home had a Persian name only, Mordecai, which was the Persian name for Marduk, the Babylonian god of war. Mordecai's ancestry went back to Saul, the son of Kish. Mordecai was the son of a Benjamite, Jair.

The first wave of the captivity of King Nebuchadnezzar going to Babylon from Jerusalem was the deportation in 609 BC. The last wave went to Babylon in 586 BC. Esther 2:6 tells us Mordecai was one of the captives taken in this last wave as he was no older than a little boy then. The first return of the exiles was in 539 BC, 70 years after the first deportation in 609 BC. That was when Mordecai went back to Jerusalem. But now it is 480 BC at the latest date under Xerxes the Great or as some say in 518 BC at the earliest under Darius the I, Darius the Mede. If it is 480 BC, the age of Mordecai now would have been over 100. If this time is 518 BC, Mordecai would be about 75 years old now. At any rate, Mordecai is a Jewish statesman, par excellence, a tribal leader of the tribe of Benjamin, and he with Esther are the two Jewish stars of this sacred and last historical book.

When a small band of exiles, no more than 50-60,000 of them returned to rebuild Jerusalem in 539 BC, after the seventy years of captivity, one of the men who went back was this Benjamite leader named Mordecai. In Ezra 2: 1, 2, we read, "Now these are the people of the province who came up out of captivity of the exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away to Babylon, and returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his city. These came with Zerrubbabel, Jeshua, Nehemiah, Seraiah, Reelaiah, Mordecai, Bilshan, Mispar, Bigvai, Rehum, and Baanah."

Dr. Lightfoot, in his commentary tells us this Mordecai is the same Mordecai who after going up to Jerusalem with the first wave of exiles going back, helped in the initial resettlement of his people in Israel until the building of the temple was stopped. Then he went back to the Persian Court,

to King Ahasuerus, to see what service he could render there, and by God's design, to find out about his own relatives who stayed in Persia. Upon arrival back in Persia, it must have been on getting back or shortly afterward that Mordecai's uncle and aunt died, leaving behind a young girl born to them apparently in their later years that they had named Hadassah. Hadassah is a Hebrew name meaning, "the myrtle tree." The myrtle tree, *hadas*, was then and now a prevalent Palestinian evergreen reaching as high as 30 feet. Its fragrant leaves and scented white flowers were used for perfume.

Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 55:12, 13 spoke of the myrtle tree in 698 BC, over 200 years before this time around 480 BC. His prophecy, that spoke of myrtle, spoke of the deliverance and return of the Jews out of Babylon. The words are beautiful and are sung in Jewish songs. "For you will go out with joy, and be led forth with peace; The mountains and the hills will break forth in singing, with shouts of joy before you, And all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thorn bush, the cypress will come up, and instead of the nettle or brier the myrtle will come up. And it will be a memorial to the Lord, For an everlasting sign which will not be cut off."

Hadassah's Hebrew name was a prophecy of deliverance—that Israel would go out of captivity, led forth by God into their own land again. The prophecy is that they would go out in triumph, not in trembling as they went into Babylonian captivity. They would go back not in regret to leave Babylon as they had regretted to leave Jerusalem for Babylon. It would be a return of joy and peace. Their restoration to Zion was to be glorious, as they journeyed over the mountains. The mountains and the hills were spoken of as breaking forth into singing and the people could not hold their peace, but were shouting for joy. Even the trees of the field were seen as clapping their hands in the breeze of God whose hand was on the move. And upon return, the land they expected to be overgrown with briars, nettles and thorn bushes was going to welcome them with cypress trees and myrtle trees.

What a joy Hadassah must have been when she was born to Mordecai's uncle and aunt. As Mordecai went to Jerusalem in the first wave of the restoration, Hadassah's parents must have dreamed of following him soon. They would go next, skipping over the mountains in joy with their own little Myrtle in their arms. It was not to be. By some unknown death, both of Hadassah's parents were suddenly snatched from her and she was left a helpless orphan. v. 7. But the joy of growing up probably as a teenager in Mordecai's home, obedient to him as if he were her own father was short lived. A big deal had happened in Persia. The king had made a great feast for

187 days, and at the end, when he was drunk, he had called the queen, Vashti, to come and parade her beauty in front of his drunken princes and nobles. When the queen refused, King Ahasuerus divorced her on the spot. This king was an evil man. His life was all about abuse of money, sex, power, and alcohol. To tell you how corrupt and evil King Xerxes the Great was, he met an influential man from Lydia named Pythias who contributed heavily to his campaign against the Greeks. All but one of Pythias' sons served in the Persian army. Xerxes went to Pythias and demanded that his last and youngest son would serve in Persian army too. Pythias begged the king to allow his youngest son to stay home and support his dad in his old age. Xerxes again, as it happened with Vashti, flew into an uncontrollable rage, frothing at the mouth like a wild boar. History records the king ordered this youngest son of Pythias to be cut into pieces for his army to march between the pieces. Don't get the feeling that Ahasuerus is a reinactment of some Hollywood actor in the King and I.

In 483 BC when Ahasuerus divorced Queen Vashti, Rome was only a second rate Italian commonwealth. Egypt often revolted and Persia subdued her. But Greece kept King Ahasuerus angry as they frustrated his attempts to subdue them in the famous battles of Thermopylae, Artemus, Salamis, and in 480 BC, the Greeks won against this Persian monarch at Salamis. Esther 2 states, after these things, the divorce of Vashti and the defeats to the Greeks in his unsuccessful Greek campaign, the king was back home and missing the Queen. Notice Esther 2:1—he remembered Vashti. The Hebrew word for remembered is **zakar**, which means to earnestly remember, but the law of the Medes and the Persians was unalterable, so...the king's attendants proposed a beauty contest in all the 127 provinces. There were to be overseers in these provinces to take by force these fair young maidens into the king's harem. The idea sounded like fun to this king who was feeling deprived, so the hunt was on. Esther was a very beautiful woman. There was no way she could escape the clutches of the king's servants who were scouring the empire from India to Ethiopia for beautiful women. V.8 tells us that it came about when the command and decree of the king was heard, many young ladies were gathered to Susa, the capital, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, in charge of the king's harem. Don't think Esther had been hoping for this honor. A wife in the King's harem would live no normal life as the wife of one man, to raise a family and rejoice as the mother of children. The plan was simple. A beauty contest it would be for Miss Persia to become the Queen. And Esther was taken by force into the custody of the Hegai. The beautification project was a one-year project.

After the purification/beautification project with six months of oil of myrrh and six months of spices and cosmetics, one by one, each contestant would go in to spend a night with the king. These women each became a wife to the king, though they might never see the king again unless he happened to call for them. All but one of them would become his secondary wives one of his concubines, and by law they could not marry. They would be imprisoned concubines under the custody of Shaashgaz, the eunuch in charge of the king's secondary wives. Esther had not been dreaming of this sad plight. To be an orphan was one thing, to be the King's one-night delight was another thing she never hoped or dreamed for. To be the unloved concubine of a wicked king was not an enviable lot. Notice verses 12-14. Esther's life was being ruined in the harem of an evil king. Oh, oh, that her parent's had lived to carry their little myrtle tree back to Jerusalem. It was not to be. It must have seemed like a nightmare to Esther, but the hand of God was on the move. His hand began to guide both Mordecai and Esther as Esther learned three lessons most people, even most believers fail to ever learn. **What are these three lessons we must learn** if we believe in God's providence and know His hand is on the move for us and for His people yet today?

WE MUST LEARN TO COME TO TERMS AND MAKE PEACE

WITH OUR PAST. (I.) v. 9-11. Esther, thus was a beauty contestant in this all Persia beauty contest. She was a servant of the Most High God. In a dark land of idolatry, she shone like a star. Esther, the rising star, the planet star Venus, somehow learned to live and cope with her past. Millions claim they cannot shine today because they are victims of yesterday's darkness. Like the country song, they have a long chain on. They are chained to their past, and unable to cope with their present. Esther had every reason to be bitter and angry about her past. But the pleasant spirit of this young woman shows us this young lady carried a poise and a purpose in her life and walk that no one could miss. Notice v. 9. Esther pleased the eunuch in charge of the beauty contestants. Notice how her behavior elevated her to top spot—the best place in the harem.

Esther made peace with God that she was an exile, a despised Jew, a once orphan. Yet, she didn't wear her colors on her sleeve. Esther saw God's hand on the move, as in charge, and this "big picture" she carried, this perspective helped her cope effectively with her present. Esther somehow realized that God was sovereign in the affairs of men and women. She must have learned at the feet of Mordecai Proverbs 21:1—"The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever He wishes or pleases." Beloved, when we are dealing with a difficult past, it helps to realize that our past as well as our present and future are all part of

the “big picture” God is painting. He is working out His purposes, and Rev. 11:15 promises us that He will reign for ever and ever. This promise is, “The kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ, and He will reign for ever and ever.” Hallelujah.

We need to remember we are not pawns, but people. We must stop looking at ourselves as victims and see ourselves as victors, more than conquerors through Him who loved us—Romans 8:37. We need to let God wipe away the tears from the eyes of our memories. I know Esther must have cried herself to sleep many a night in the harem that long year. But she kept seeing God somewhere in the shadows. She must have thrilled to know as an orphan, God provided her a loving uncle to parent her, to teach her to obey, and to protect her and she obeyed Mordecai and told no one her nationality.

Somehow, though the book of Esther never mentions the name of God or the word prayer, I believe Esther often turned to God in prayer to deal with her hurts. She couldn't bring her parents back from the dead. She couldn't escape the harem of Ahasuerus. When we find ourselves in a situation we cannot change, we need to ask God to help us accept it and make peace with it. We must come to terms with the binds we are in. In acceptance of the place God has allowed us to be in, there is peace. And now Esther became the most popular girl in the king's harem. Her environment was impacted by her life of disciplined obedience learned as a teen under Mordecai. She was married to a fragrant faith in God whom she knew would be faithful to her no matter what happened. And for 365 days, every day Mordecai walked back and forth in front of the king's harem, v. 11 to find out how she was doing. He told her not to disclose her nationality, people or kindred. v. 10 All truths are not to be spoken at all times. Esther being born in Shushan, her parents being dead, everyone took her to be of Persian extraction. Mordecai, led by the hand of the Lord, was not going to let Esther undeceive the other maidens. In Mordecai's home, Esther had obeyed him. Now she continued to do the same. When we fight God and those he places over us, we keep the victimization going. When we obey, we find peace. Secondly,

WE MUST LEARN TO MAXIMIZE OUR PRESENT NO MATTER WHAT IT IS. (II.) v. 15-17. What is God asking of you? Do you want to do it? No, not really. Would you choose it? No, not really. Would you prefer that God's call would be for you to do something different? Yes! Are you tempted to argue with God's calling of you in your present circumstances? Yes! Have you told God no--more than once in His call? Perhaps, many times, right? But the day comes when we remember God's hand is on the

move even in us and we quit kicking and fighting and stomping and resisting and we simply acquiesce to His will. We don't just take out the garbage stomping as we go. No, we go to take out the garbage singing to the Lord.

Each of the women could wear as much spices and oils and perfumes as they wanted—"anything they desired—v. 13." Notice the difference in Esther. In the worst of circumstances, she maximized the authority of Hegai, the king's eunuch over her. She let Hegai be her coach. And under Hegai's coaching, Esther's evening to visit the king arrived. v. 15. She found favor with Hegai and in the eyes of all who saw her. Now she was off to her honeymoon suite in the tenth month of Tebeth in the seventh year of his reign—about 478 or 479 BC. Esther asked for nothing special to take with her to impress the king as the other girls had done. Her natural God-given beauty as a Jewish virgin and her evident loveliness of spirit instantly captured the heart of the king. The contest was over. King Ahasuerus set the royal crown on her head and made her queen, v. 17 instead of Vashti. God's hand was really on the move now. He had placed one of His own special daughters as the wife and queen of this evil king to maximize the present. Thirdly,

WE MUST FACE OUR FUTURE WITH A FAITH THAT DRIVES ALL FEAR AWAY. (III.) v. 18-23 Before we look at the unique banquet the King gave for his new queen, rush ahead to notice Mordecai's new place, v. 19-23, sitting at the king's gate. What is that an image of? Do you think Queen Esther had anything to do with this? You bet! Esther was fearless, letting her new husband know her wishes. Mordecai was now a Susa judge sitting at the king's gate where he uncovered a plot of treason to kill the king. Bigthan and Teresh were guards at the palace door plotting to kill the king—v. 21. Mordecai told the Queen who told the King whose life was save. Queen Esther disclosed to the king that the death plot had been uncovered by his faithful judge, Mordecai. The plot was investigated and confirmed. Both treasonous men were soon hanging on gallows. No big deal was made of the kindness of Mordecai, but it was written in the book of the chronicles in the king's presence that Mordecai had spared his life. Already, again God's hand was on the move, moving pieces to save His people from a death threat to Israel by Haman. God's hand was on the move to intervene.

Now let's go back to this new banquet for the king's new queen. It wasn't 187 days of wine and drunkenness. Esther got her wishes. What a different banquet! The king must have consulted with her for her dreams for the banquet. He called it Esther's banquet, Esther's feast. v. 18. It was so different. She was there, not in an auxiliary room of the palace, as Queen

Vashti had been. Esther's feast was with her present in all her robed and crowned beauty. The Hebrew word for remission of taxes or a holiday is **hanachah**. This holiday meant the release of prisoners and forgiveness of debtors. It was a time to give gifts to the needy, according to the king's bounty. (v.18) As soon as God hung his star in the Persian sky, Esther began to shine brightly with a banquet that was a foretaste of the coming of Messiah. Over 200 years earlier, Isaiah the prophet prophesied in Isaiah 61:1-3. Do you suppose Mordecai ever did scripture memory for Esther growing up? Do you suppose she knew Isaiah 61, the very passage Jesus read in Nazareth when He disclosed He was Messiah? I believe so. What stars Mordecai and Esther were becoming! The best was yet to come, but the lessons for today—do you have them? Do you know them? (1) We must learn to come to terms and make peace with our past. (2) We must learn to maximize our present, no matter what it is. (3) We must learn to face our future with a faith that drives all fear away. And when we do, watch out obedient ones, the hand of God again will be on the move. Amen.