

## The Contest and the Crown

The Shadow Sovereign-Part 3

*Esther 2:1-20*

A Christian magazine recently featured a number of humorous things on the subject of love and romance.

My favorite was a story about a single woman who got tired of looking for Mr. Right. She had tried for so long to find a nice guy who would buy her roses and act like a gentleman, but nothing had worked. So she finally decided to place an ad in the classifieds that simply read, "Husband wanted!"

The next day she got a dozen calls.

All of them, however, were from women saying, "You want a husband? You can have mine!"

I didn't think that was funny either.

When my youngest daughter was around twelve years old, I asked her, "Honey, have you ever been kissed?"

She said, "No sir."

I said, "Honey, that's super!"

She responded, "Well, one time in first grade Sunday School a boy tried to kiss me after class."

"What?! Right there in the Sunday School classroom?" I asked.

"Yes sir," she answered. "Right there in class."

"What did you do?"

"I punched him in the stomach!" she said.

"You punched him in the stomach?!"

"Yes, I did."

I smiled. "That's great, honey!"

My daughter is 18 now, but I'm sure she would still answer the question exactly the same way!

Kids say the funniest things, don't they? And often their observations give even us adults interesting insight into the complex world we live in. Here's what some other kids had to say about love and romance.

When asked how love happens, a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader named Janet said, "No one's sure how it happens, but I think it has something to do with how you smell."

I think she's been talking to my dog.

When asked what it means to fall in love, Nine-year-old, Roger, said, "Falling in love is like an avalanche and you better run for your life."

He must have some bad experiences.

When asked how to make a marriage work, little Ricky said, "Tell your wife she looks pretty even when she looks like a truck."

He's been married before.

Another boy said, "Well, you have to find somebody who likes the same stuff. If you like sports, she should like them too; and she should keep the chips and dip coming!"

This guy's in for a rough life.

When asked how to decide which person to marry, a little girl said, "Well . . . you see . . . no person really decides before they grow up who they're going to marry. God decides it all way before and you get to find out later who you're stuck with."

I wonder which parent she got that from.

I find it fascinating that in almost every romantic story – whether in movies, books, or in real life – some things are almost universally accepted as "romantic." Flowers, cards, candy, chivalry, kindness, and . . . yes . . . even a little perfume are just a few of them.

Romance is what fairy-tales are made of.

And that's why the book of Esther has all the trappings of a good fairy-tale. There's a beautiful maiden, a lonely king, a kingdom-wide pageant, and a stunning palace. It's a real-life Cinderella story. But as we dive further into our study of Esther, we'll discover that it isn't a love story at all – or at least not between a prince and princess.

The only love in this story is between God and a prodigal nation.

When the curtain closes at the end of Esther chapter 1, several years go by before the story picks up again. During that time, Ahasuerus leads the

largest Persian army in history to accomplish what his father never could: conquer Greece. One inscription actually reveals he intended to conquer all of Europe as well.

Western Civilization is grateful he wasn't victorious. The Greeks routed his army and demolished most of his navy. Ahasuerus eventually boarded a ship and sailed home, sullen and dispirited.<sup>i</sup>

## 1. The Losing King Returns

The curtain rises in *chapter 2* with the spotlight on this defeated king. *Verse 1* reads:

*After these things (that is, after the Persian war) when the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. Then the king's attendants, who served him, said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti.*

We know historically that Kings had concubines as lesser wives. They also had wives of higher rank who could wear the crown at any time depending on the King's whims and wishes.

History tells us that one of Ahasuerus' higher wives, Amenstris, had born him a son who he chose as the heir to the throne.<sup>ii</sup> Amenstris has either passed away or no longer has the King's favor during this time. History doesn't tell us which, but it does tell us that Vashti took her place.

Now that Vashti is gone, there is a void in the Royal palace as well as in the King's heart. So you can see why Ahasuerus is now regretting his decision to banish her. The Hebrew construction of *Esther 2:1* strongly implies that Ahasuerus is now blaming his seven counselors for persuading him to banish the queen.

He's not in a good mood.

His troops have been depleted along with his war chest; his credibility throughout the empire has diminished; his title of "king of kings" has been lost, and now he returns home to face the daunting reminder that his favorite wife is gone.

So his seven counselors approach him with an intriguing proposition: "Listen oh great King, why don't we have an empire-wide beauty contest and find you another queen. What do you say?"

This might not seem like an odd request to us, but to the Persians it would have been unheard of. According to Herodotus, the Persian custom required that a Queen be related to one of the seven noble families.<sup>iii</sup> So what in the world were these counselors thinking?

Some scholars believe that Memucan – the leading noble who initially verbalized the idea of getting rid of Vashti – had a marriageable relative in his own family who he hoped would win the crown. Regardless, he and his six friends know they are in deep trouble if they don't come up with a solution . . . and fast. The King needed a beautiful replacement for Vashti or else they're in for it. And that's why these seven counselors go against all Persian customs and tradition – which they normally defended so ardently – to suggest that the queen be chosen from the common people of the Empire.

This kind of thing had never been done before in Persian history.

It's a real Cinderella story in the making . . . and only a God as great as ours could use all the political intrigue, manipulation and corruption to pull it off.

The counselors' plan is spelled out for us in *verses 3-4*:

*Let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom (remember . . . this kingdom stretches from Africa to India) that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to the citadel of Susa, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given them. (4) Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti." And the matter pleased the king.*

To the citizens of Persia this was a once in a lifetime opportunity. Anyone can apply! Anyone can become a princess! This was the talk in every town and village throughout the empire: "who will win the crown?" The streets must have been filled with frenzy upon hearing this news. Thousands must have stood in line as they anxiously awaited the arrival of the King's attendant.

Memberships at Weight Watchers were going through the roof! Women were lying about their age probably more than any other time in human history. And why not? The prize was the crown and the wealth and the butlers and the maids and the money and the food and the leisure and the clothing. The winner got it all.

Happy ever after was waiting.

But before you get too caught up in what looks to be a normal, run-of-the-mill fairy tale, don't forget what this contest is really about. There's no way to sanitize what will happen in the next scene of this story. There will be only one judge. And the performances will be private.

Make no mistake about it . . . behind the imperial mask of pomp and circumstance surrounding this pageant, there is the face of debauchery, selfishness, and everything but love.

The palace eunuchs were given the administrative oversight of the harem. They kept a close watch over the women because of all the drama and competition and feuding that would have taken place every day. Most of these women will never get past a one night stand with the King. They will live forgotten lives, sequestered away in the Palace of Susa. One commentator called the harem of the kings, "luxurious desolation."<sup>iv</sup>

## 2. The Leading Characters Appear

Look at *verse 5*:

*Now there was at the citadel in Susa a Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, who had been taken into exile from Jerusalem with the captives who had been exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had exiled.*

As soon as we're introduced to Mordecai in verse 5 we discover that he came from a royal family. Mordecai's lineage dates back to King Saul.<sup>v</sup>

In fact, he and his cousin are descendants of what used to be the royal tribe in Israel. But regardless of this, Mordecai's name doesn't bear any resemblance to his Jewish lineage. His name is simply the transliteration of *Marduk* – the name of the chief Babylonian god.<sup>vi</sup>

So this begs a few questions. First, what is a good Jewish man from the tribe of Benjamin doing in Susa in the first place? Secondly, why didn't he return to Jerusalem when the Persian captivity ended? And, lastly, why is he named after a pagan god?

The answer to all these questions might be found in Mordecai's family history.

Hundreds of years earlier, when King David was running for his life from Absalom, Mordecai's

forefather, Shimei, threw rocks at David and cursed him for stealing away Saul's throne. David's son, Solomon, later put Shimei to death. If Mordecai knew all this, then perhaps Jerusalem represented a place of defeat for him. It was the place where his family had lost their bid for power.

It's no surprise then, that he decided to stay in Persia.

Just as his father had willingly absorbed himself into the Persian culture, which is seen in the fact that he named his son after a pagan god, Mordecai absorbed himself in the culture as well.

At this point in the story he is so *persianized* that he even keeps his Jewish heritage the best kept secret in the whole land. Nobody knows he's a Jew . . . and he intends to keep it that way.

This is a good place to stop and consider a point of application. In the Persia that surrounds you everyday – in your job or school or gym or home – are you keeping your relationship to Jesus Christ a secret? Does anyone know you're a Christian?

I can't tell you how many people have said to me over the years something like, "I'm not very good at talking about Christ, so I just live it." There's an ancient 2-syllable Hebrew word for that, you know . . . It's the word, "cop-out!"

Has it ever occurred to you that no one will ever be saved just by watching you?

Sure, it's important to live in a way that lines up with your message. But if people don't know why you're living the way you are, they'll most likely give you the credit. The only way they can see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven is if you give glory to the Father in heaven.

Paul says in *Romans 10:17* that ***Faith comes by hearing the word of God.*** It doesn't come by watching; it doesn't come by observing; it comes by hearing.

It takes a messenger who is willing to deliver special revelation to someone in order for them to be saved. So don't keep your Christianity a secret. Don't be like Mordecai in Persia. People need to hear the Gospel . . . and you can give it to them.

Now let's get back to the story.

For the first time in this study we are finally introduced to the character who this whole play is named after. Esther is about to grace the stage.

***Esther 2:7*** says:

***He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had no father or mother. Now the young lady was beautiful of form and face, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.***

This time we're given both the Hebrew name, *Hadassah*, which refers to the flower of a myrtle bush, and her pagan name, *Esther*, which is most likely a transliteration of *Ishtar* – the Babylonian goddess of love.<sup>vii</sup>

Evidently Esther was left orphaned at childhood by the death of her parents, so Mordecai, who was 15 years older than her, adopted her as his own.

### **3. The Lavish Contest Begins**

Mordecai gets wind of the contest. He sees the procession in the streets. He hears the gossip on the lips of passersby. He knows Esther is incredibly beautiful, and he's most likely been driving away suitors for the past few years. Now he finally has a chance to cash in on his niece's good looks. He can use her beauty as a means to his own success.

Notice *verse 8*:

***So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to the citadel of Susa into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women.***

I can think of at least 3 good reasons why Esther shouldn't stand a chance at winning.

First of all, she's an orphan. She has no family connections. She is just an ordinary peasant girl: a nobody who nobody knew.

Second of all, she's up against fierce competition. According to Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, this contest had attracted more than 1,000 young women. The palace was swimming with beautiful women. Esther wasn't the only girl turning heads.

Last of all, she was a Jewess. The Jews were members of a defeated nation. They were outsiders who had adopted Persian ways but were still not considered Persians. If the news leaks out that she's a Jew, whatever slim chance she might have of winning would disappear.

That's why you read in *verse 10* that ***“Esther did not make known her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had instructed her that she should not make them known.”***

Mordecai is effectively saying to Esther, “Esther, Israel is in the past. God might have made you a Jewess, but it won't do you any good out here. Out here you have to live by your wits . . . you have to fend for yourself.”

Mordecai is implying that once Esther reaches the King's court, she'll be on her own. But he couldn't have been more wrong.

We just discussed three reasons why Esther is walking into this competition with little to no chance of winning, but we are about to see how God will work behind the scenes to insure that Esther has no chance of losing.

The first thing He does is give her favor with everyone in the Palace. *Verse 9* tells us the Esther “pleased” Hegai, who, if you remember, was the chief administrator of this contest. The verse ends by saying, ***“she found favor with him.”***

That word, “favor,” is the Hebrew word, *khesed*, which is the same term used of God's covenant favor and kindness toward His people. We see that word again in *verse 15*, when it says, ***“Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her.”***

There is no other explanation for this other than the fact that God is turning the hearts of everyone toward her. What we should be reading here is that Esther found *envy* in the eyes of all who saw her . . . or *jealousy* . . . or *hatred*. This is a competition, after all. All the women present are in it to win it.

Yet, instead, we read that she found favor with everyone. How can that be?

Don't miss this, friend. God may be invisible – but He is still involved. His hand is invisible, but His plan is invincible.

Look at what happens in *verse 9*:

***So he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem.***

Within a matter of hours, Esther is given her own private suite, seven maids, and plenty to eat and drink. The same can't be said of poor Mordecai. *Verse 11* tells us that ***“Every day Mordecai walked back and forth in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and how she fared.”***

He's biting his nails. He's on pins and needles. He's probably thinking to himself, "What have I done? She's in there with 1,400+ contestants. She's naïve. She'll never keep her secret. She doesn't stand a chance! There's got to be something *I can do* to make this work out in her favor."

What he doesn't know is that God is already working things out in her favor – without Mordecai's help.

Mordecai has to learn that he isn't sovereign over Esther's life. God is.

While he paces anxiously around the building, he has no clue how Esther is being pampered inside. She isn't a queen yet, but she's being treated like one. Look at *verse 12*:

*Now when the turn of each young lady came to go in to King Ahasuerus, after the end of her twelve months under the regulations for the women – for the days of their beautification were completed as follows: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and the cosmetics for women.*

You thought your wife took a long time to get ready? Try waiting 12 months!

But what was all this for?

The oil of myrrh was used to soften and lighten the skin. Since most of these women worked outdoors, their skin had been darkened and calloused by the sun. To the Persians, fair skin was a sign of beauty. So it would take around 12 months of message therapy and lack of sunlight to soften and lighten the complexion of these women.<sup>viii</sup>

As for the myrrh and other cosmetics, these were fully-developed forms of make-up. But the Persians didn't just wear make-up for beauty's sake . . . they wore it for sanctification's sake.

The priests in this region were the ones who developed and protected the science of cosmetics. Because they saw the physical as merely a gateway to the spiritual they truly believed that cleanliness was next to godliness!

Women bathed in pools of spices since smell was connected to divine acceptance. Women wore make-up around their eyes and bracelets around their arms, necks and feet to ward off evil spirits. They were given rouge for their cheeks, all shades of lipstick and eyeliner, and fingernail polish, because beauty brought them closer to the gods. And in a matter of months they would be led before a descendant of the gods himself. . .

The King.

Along with this beautification process, the women were also being schooled in court customs and royal etiquette. As one scholar noted, they were learning what to say and how to say it.<sup>ix</sup>

These women had come straight from the fields and many of them were unschooled, illiterate, and untrained. But they were beautiful. And in 12 months, one of them would sit on the throne as queen.

So this 12-month process was a crash course on how to look like a queen, sound like a queen, eat like a queen, smell like a queen and act like a queen.

And at this point in the story Esther doesn't seem to be protesting. Unlike Daniel before her, she isn't refusing to eat the meat or drink the wine which has been offered to idols.<sup>x</sup>

She's a character without a lot of character. And she will keep her secret at all costs.

#### 4. The Lowly Queen is Crowned

As much as theologians and pastors would like to pretty up the next scene, it's impossible to. As one author said, this contest would become nothing less than a sordid meat market.<sup>xi</sup>

Esther will lose her virginity to a pagan Gentile along with over a thousand other young women. Only one will be chosen.

Jewish Rabbi's attempted to clean up this chapter by adding over a hundred verses to the original text – which can be found in the Greek Septuagint.

Some of their additions attempted to reconcile Esther's character by claiming she never violated the dietary kosher laws of the Hebrews. In one verse they actually have her pray these words to God: "You know everything; and you know that I hate the pomp of the wicked, and the bed of the uncircumcised and any foreigner."<sup>xii</sup>

These are obvious attempts to sanctify the actions of Esther and keep her in heroic form.

Some evangelical authors have taken a different approach at exonerating Esther from blame. They make the case that when *verse 16* says Esther was "*taken to King Ahasuerus*," the verb "taken" implied it was against her will.

The problem with this interpretation is that the same verb is found in *verse 15* where we're told that "*Mordecai took her as his daughter*." This interpretation just isn't true. As unfortunate as it

sounds, Esther wasn't taken by force. She went willingly.

She has her best outfit on. Her face is covered in make-up. Her body is drenched in perfume. Her mind is filled with the secrets given to her by the chief eunuch who wants to see her win the crown.

Look at *verses 16-17*:

***So Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus to his royal palace in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. (17) The King loved Esther more than all the women, and she found favor and kindness with him more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.***

Winning the crown sounds hollow, doesn't it? This is a very anti-climactic moment in the story. Esther is now Miss Persia, but is that anything to be excited about? Was it worth her virginity? Was it worth her integrity?

I hope not.

I wonder how many young ladies have sacrificed their virginity to keep that boyfriend who says, "If you love me you will."

I wonder how many professionals have kept their faith a secret so that it didn't get in the way of their climb up the social ladder.

I wonder how many Christians are keeping their relationship to God hidden because they want to get along with the Persians.

Esther might have gained the position of Queen, but she didn't gain a husband. *Verse 17* says the king loved Esther more than all the women, but he still loved them too. The text never says, "And after the crowning of Esther, the King ordered that his harem be released and his concubines too."

Not even close.

Look at *verse 19*: "***When the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai was sitting at the gate.***"

Why is there a second time? Esther has already won the crown. Shouldn't the contest be over now?

It was.

This has nothing to do with a contest. It has everything to do with the King's ever-expanding harem.

Esther will occupy the place of Queen, but she will not be the sole occupant of the King's bed. In fact, her role will not even allow her unhindered

access to his bedroom. Esther won the crown, but she didn't win a close, honest relationship.

But as bad as all this sounds, it would have been a lot worse for her had she lost. Verses **13-14** tell us what happened to the losers:

***The young lady would go in to the king in this way; anything that she desired was given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. (14) In the evening she would go in and in the morning she would return to the second harem, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.***

Did you catch that? Women go in as young ladies and come back out as concubines. They are relegated to a life of luxurious desolation, never to be called on again unless the King happens to remember their names. The King, however, isn't in the habit of remembering names. He's in the habit of adding names.

So God, in His grace, put Esther at the front of the line. Out of all the thousands of women who came and went from the palace, she would be one the King would remember.

This reveals to us the amazing truth about the character of God that He works through faithful people and in spite of unfaithful people. His providence is unstoppable. He sheds His grace on us even when we don't deserve it.

This doesn't mean we can sin all we want just so grace will pile up more and more. When the Apostle Paul said in ***Romans 5:20***, "***where sin abounded, grace abounded more,***" he wasn't giving us a license to sin – as some people thought at that time. He was simply revealing just how deep the love of God is. The amazing truth is that even when we disobey God – which is daily – He never leaves us nor forsakes us.

That's what Esther will find throughout her story. She is being drenched in more than just myrrh and Persian spices. She is being drenched in the grace of God. The aroma of His kindness toward her permeates the pages of her story from cover to cover.

In spite of her disobedience . . . in spite of the fact she keeps her heritage a secret . . . in spite of her immorality . . . God turned the heart of that dirty old man so that he chose her to be his queen.

God was the one who placed Esther on the throne . . . not Ahasuerus. He didn't choose her because she was more beautiful than others or because she was special in His eyes . . . He chose her because he would use her to bring about the salvation of His people.

And think about it . . .

God was the One who gave Esther her beauty in the first place. God was the One who gave her a rich, Jewish heritage. God was the one who placed her in Persia at such an opportune time.

Why? Because He had made a promise to Israel's forefathers that He would make a great nation out of them and that from them He would bring forth the Savior of the world. So nothing – not even the so-called “king of the world” – could stand in the way of that.

What Esther will learn – along with you and I – is that when God makes a promise . . . He keeps it.

Do you want to live a satisfied life, friend? Trust God.

Do you want to see God at work? Co-labor with Him.

Do you want to make a difference in the world? Submit yourself to God's will and let the world know you belong to Him.

Don't get so focused on winning a contest and a crown that you miss out on what God is doing in your life and the lives of others around you. God is at work even now as you're reading this. . .

Are you a part of it?

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/01/2011 by Stephen Davey.

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