

# “For Richer”: Esther and Xerxes—Married for Such a Time as This

ESTHER 4:9–8:17

**E**veryone loves a good story, especially one in which great events are determined by the relationship of a husband and wife. The story of the Persian King Xerxes and the Jewish girl Esther is one of the greatest. It has several gripping elements: intrigue in high places, an orphan girl who becomes a queen, a romance, a royal wedding, a main character with a hidden identity, and dramatic irony in which the villain makes plans for his own honor without realizing that the king intends to honor his enemy—a reversal known only to the reader. The villain erects a scaffold for the execution of his enemy but ends up being executed on it himself. There are moments of great dramatic tension, a sudden reversal of fates, issues of social justice that prick the conscience, and a happy ending in which the underdog triumphs. But our interest in the story will focus on the two main characters—Xerxes and Esther—and their marriage. It is a remarkable example of what couples may accomplish if, in times of plenty or in positions of influence, they

seek the advancement of God's kingdom rather than merely feathering their own nests.

Reading the entire book of Esther in one sitting is a great way to prepare for this study. Those unable to do this will need to know the following salient points before doing this study. The story takes place during the exile experience of God's people in the reign of Xerxes the Persian king (486–465 BC). The king throws a stag party and demands that his wife parade herself. When she refuses (Esther 1:12), Xerxes rejects Vashti and passes a decree “that every man should be ruler over his own household” (1:22). The king then conducts a beauty contest to find a successor and spends a night with each of the candidates before she joins the harem (2:14). By a sovereign coincidence, an orphaned Jewish girl named Hadassah (also called Esther), who has been raised by her cousin Mordecai, succeeds first in being chosen for the contest (2:9) and then is chosen as queen (2:17). Apparently, the king does not know her Jewish identity, and she keeps this secret. However, Xerxes' chief minister, Haman, hates the Jews and plots to exterminate them, making Mordecai his prime target (3:8). He succeeds in manipulating Xerxes to pass a law that all Jews will be exterminated on a certain day (3:13). When Mordecai learns of this, he appeals to Esther “to go into the king's presence to beg for mercy and plead with him for her people” (4:8).

1. It has been said that for every ten people who can maintain their integrity in times of adversity, only one can survive prosperity. Why do you think this could be true?

#### READ ESTHER 4:9-17.

2. Mordecai was convinced that Esther had “come to royal position for such a time as this” (verse 14). What indications did he give that God could save his people with or without Esther's help?

#### READ ESTHER 5:1-7:10.

3. God is never mentioned by name in the whole book of Esther. What hints does the writer give us that God is very much at work?
4. What evidence of faith in God did Esther give in her initial petition to the king (7:3-6)?

#### READ ESTHER 8:1-17.

5. What further faith did Esther express after being assured of her and her cousin's survival?

6. What kinds of situations in modern marriages require such God-inspired boldness in confronting one's spouse?
- ♣ 7. What evidences are found in the biblical story that Esther kept her integrity even though Xerxes had undoubtedly married her out of lust? What encouragement does Esther's life offer to a person who is married to a nonbeliever?
8. Queen Vashti refused to submit to her husband and was deposed; Queen Esther asked her husband to submit to her request and succeeded. How can we account for the strange reversal in this story?
- ♣ 9. Recall our study of Mr. and Mrs. Samson (Judges 14:1-20), in which another woman used her influ-

- ence to gain an advantage for her own people. Why is Mrs. Samson's example so repulsive and Esther's example so commendable?
- ♣ 10. When do you think positive persuasion would have become manipulation in Esther's petition? Give an example of how the same thing could happen in your own marriage.
- ♣ 11. Most couples have at least some periods of "for richer" in their marriage journey, whether in money, possessions, power, or influence. When in the past have you been able to express faith like Esther's in the complex issues surrounding such an opportunity? When do you feel you have failed?