

How to be a woman of authority

**QUEEN
TAKE YOUR
THRONE**

Eileen Wallis

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FOREWORD

Modern thinking about the place of women in society has undergone a major revolution in recent years, and much of it has been good. This is not to say that we agree with the declared intentions of the Women's Liberation Movement, but we do want to see God's daughters realizing their full spiritual potential.

The plain fact is that God has not made men and women equal. Many women are superior to many men in their giftedness, but in the kingdom of God giftedness does not equal government. Are we not using the wrong terms when we think about superiority and inferiority in relation to men and women? It is not that one is superior to the other, it is just that they are different. Women have different roles to play, different contributions to make and often different gifts to exercise in the work of God, all of them just as important as those which he has given to men.

In homes where women wear the trousers and men take the back seat, it is often the man who is to blame. He has ducked out of his God-given responsibility. I once asked a wife why she always made the major decisions in the home. She replied, 'I really want to submit to my husband. I just wish to goodness he would give me something to submit to!'

It is evident that in homes and churches where God's order prevails – where men lovingly and firmly take their leadership role, and women submit without being stifled or suppressed – there is harmony and security. Where it is otherwise, the overall leadership always remains weak until God's order is re-established.

It has surely been right that during these past years of spiritual recovery there has been a strong emphasis on the headship of the man. This has been necessary so that a firm foundation could be laid for all that was to follow. However, it is all too easy to emphasize this truth in such a way that there is little or no room made for our womenfolk to exercise their God-given ministry; and that results in incalculable loss for the kingdom of God.

Sometimes the impression is given that it is the man who exercises authority and the only thing that you look for from the women is submission. This has served to deepen in some women feelings of inferiority and to confirm the lie of Satan, which all too many of them have embraced, that they are second-class citizens in the kingdom of God. Others who possess greater gifts become frustrated, feeling that there is no room in their local church to exercise those gifts, and so they look elsewhere for a sphere in which they can function with greater freedom.

From the story of Esther, Eileen has shown that every believing woman is called to be a queen. This is no empty or artificial title, a sop to make deprived women feel good. This is no carnival queen who basks in her moment of glory, before sinking back into oblivion. Her authority is for real, and for life. Just what that authority is and how it works is spelt out in simple, practical terms that all can understand and find relevant, whatever their station in life, and whether single or married.

Rightly used, the authority of the woman will never undermine, or even threaten that of the man. The queen's throne is to complement, not compete with, that of the king. It is because too many queenly thrones are not occupied that too many men are not as secure and as fruitful as they should be. When women of God reign in life, they challenge and provoke the men to do the same.

It only remains for me to commend this book to you. I really do know the author! I have shared my life with her for thirty-five years. I am therefore in a position to testify that she is not merely

preaching a message, but sharing what has been, over these years, a growing reality in her own life. It works for her. It can work for you too.

Arthur Wallis

INTRODUCTION

The commission to write this book came in a most unexpected way. The relevance of the story of Esther to the role of woman today began as a seed-thought in my mind in 1981. This was watered and grew as I shared my thoughts with others. Everywhere I went I seemed to be meeting women who were studying the book of Esther. During a visit to the USA in 1982 I spoke about what God was saying to me at a ladies* banquet in St Louis, Missouri.

Then Barbara Sullivan, a friend in Chicago, who got hold of a recording of that message, started the ball rolling. Feeling it contained material for a book, she passed it on to Kent Garborg of Minneapolis, her publishing agent, to see if he felt the same. He did. She then very kindly wrote to tell me what she had done. My reaction was one of total incredulity. My husband was the book-writer, not me!

Kent pursued the matter further, and I am so grateful to him for doing so. In the midst of a very demanding overseas schedule he took the trouble to visit us at our home. He shared something of how the message of Esther might be expanded, and quietly encouraged me to find out what God was saying. This confirmed what my husband had already counselled. It was a challenge that could not be lightly dismissed.

I had always enjoyed assisting my husband with his writing ministry, even the tedious task of checking manuscripts. Little did I realize that those years had been preparing me to put pen to paper myself. So it was not surprising that God gave a clear green light. Now, with the task accomplished, much of the credit must go to my best tutor, supporter and encourager, my husband Arthur. He patiently helped me to apply myself diligently to the task, and the discipline of sitting at a desk. Like most women, I much prefer activity and variety.

Nor could I have succeeded without the prayer and practical help of many friends, especially those in my own church, The Community Church, Southampton. Their comments and suggestions as the manuscript proceeded were invaluable. Diana Moss deserves my special thanks for so efficiently typing out the manuscript.

All the references are from the New International Version unless otherwise stated. I would like to encourage you to read right through the book of Esther before commencing my first chapter. Approach it with eager anticipation and it will come alive in a fresh way. Alongside each chapter heading I have indicated the relevant chapter in Esther. As you read, it is my prayer that you will be envisioned, and find faith to take your throne!

Eileen Wallis

April 1984

1. A Crown for Me?

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Esther 1

'Intruder in Buckingham Palace. Man enters Queen's bedroom.' Everyone was shocked at the headlines, and curiosity knew no bounds. Details of this incident became known around the world, and it was a humiliating time for the palace officials. But the calm bravery of the Queen herself won admiration from us all.

Queens are rare these days and regarded by some as figure-heads of pageantry, remote from the real world. Yet the attention given to Queen Elizabeth and the British Royal family is phenomenal. Books about them are bestsellers and the world's media follow their every move, revelling in incidents like 'the intruder'.

Why is it that we like to see the Queen arrayed in her crown and royal robes on State occasions, and expect her always to appear perfectly groomed? Why must she always behave graciously? Why would we be offended if the wife of the American President did not also dress and behave in a manner suited to the dignity of her position? Perhaps there is something deep down inside us that wants to be able to see a kingdom demonstrated before our eyes in a worthy manner.

A crown is a symbol of the position and authority of the monarch. It also represents a responsibility to live according to a high standard of integrity. Some women would like to wear such a crown, but few would enjoy the measure of authority that goes with it. Most of us would probably shrink from the strain of so much publicity.

Does God want us just to be hidden among the crowd of spectators, thankful we have no crown to wear? Is there not a need for every Christian woman to be seen to represent the kingdom of God, to be on show? Alongside the men we are called to demonstrate a whole new way of life. In this sense all of us have a 'crown' to wear and a measure of authority to exercise that derives from who we are, sons and daughters of the King of kings.

As a group of leaders' wives were praying together while they made plans for a ladies' meeting, one of them shared a mental picture she had been given. She stood before a gaily decorated Christmas tree and took down one of the parcels. The label on it said 'Authority', so she quickly put it back again. 'That's not for me,' she said to herself, 'I'm not a man.'

As the women pondered over this, they wondered if God was preparing them for a fresh understanding of the role of women in the church. God had blessed them with a new sense of security in seeing the men take their rightful place of leadership and authority. Now they had a feeling of expectancy in their hearts and a real desire to function more effectively.

A few weeks later I was given the opportunity of addressing the meeting about which they had been praying. Not knowing anything about what had happened, I shared with them the things God had been showing me from the story of Esther. It concerned the role of women and the measure of authority they are called to exercise. All of us were encouraged by this, and next time the church met together the women participated in a new dimension of liberty and faith.

There are many prophetic insights contained in the book of Esther concerning the role of women today. The central figure in this fascinating story is not the Persian King, nor Mordecai, but a woman, Esther. Not a dominating aggressive type of woman, but one who embodies the true meek and quiet spirit. Yet God chose her for a position of authority. We are reaping the blessing today from the way Esther fulfilled her role in the kingdom of Persia, and thus affected the destiny of Israel.

What does the world have to offer women today? No doubt quite a lot of material prosperity for some and the opportunity to use their intellectual ability for others. But modern women are often discontented with being women and consider themselves to be treated as second-class citizens.

'Using women as a sex symbol when promoting some product, or commercial enterprise, is exploitation,' complain the promoters of Women's Lib. We may be inclined to agree with this. But what alternative do they have to offer? To give up being just a woman, and reject the title 'Mrs' or 'Miss'. They want us to lose our God-given identity and become merely an 'it'.

This book is all about the crown God has chosen for you, as women of the kingdom, and it will fit you perfectly. Do not believe that this means usurping the authority God has given to the men. A recent article on the British monarchy stated, 'The Queen reigns, she does not rule.' This is equally true for us. It is time for us to discover who we are and step out in faith on the royal path to fulfilment.

2. The Crown That Did Not Fit

Esther 1

In the first chapter of Esther, we read about a banquet and celebration lasting 180 days. Just imagine all the planning and organization required. No problem of unemployment in Susa in those days! The king of Persia was determined to display the wealth and splendour of his kingdom in a manner that reflected his own glory and majesty.

Many skills were required to ensure everything was carried out to a high standard of excellence. There was lots of work for the women as well as the men, preparing accommodation for all those important guests, making beautiful clothes and cooking endless meals. Behind the scenes a great team of people worked very hard to carry out the King's orders.

Queen Vashti had a very important role and the king could not have managed so well on his own. Her beautiful appearance and manner were a real asset as they welcomed the important guests together, conveying to those visiting nobles and military men what it was like to be part of such a magnificent kingdom.

After all the guests had gone home, another shorter banquet was arranged, just for the people of Susa, and everyone from the least to the greatest enjoyed the king's generosity. He must have been very grateful to them for all their hard work in making the first one such a success.

Vashti had been given the privilege of arranging a banquet for the ladies. For the first time she could exercise her authority as Queen, on her own. How well would she handle this big opportunity? For seven days she would be the centre of attention as she took charge of the festivities. She knew that the women's eyes would not miss a thing, so every detail had to be perfect. They would closely scrutinize her choice of clothes, the food and table decorations and, of course, how she behaved.

With each day of the feast her influence upon the women grew, as they enjoyed the festivities she had planned so well. But then came an unexpected interruption. Seven men arrived conveying a message from the King. He wanted Vashti to leave the women and join him, arrayed in her crown and royal robes. How would she react to this request, which meant leaving the situation she was enjoying, to please her husband?

Without hesitation, she firmly responded, 'No!' The women gasped and the men could not believe their ears. Obviously authority had gone to her head. Queen Vashti was manifesting a spirit of rebellion and independence in front of all those watching women. This was no example to set before them, as it was bound to affect their behaviour towards their own husbands.

No wonder the King was furious. By one thoughtless act his wife had not only humiliated him, but undermined the success of all his efforts to display his great majesty and power. What was the point if he could not even command the obedience and respect of his wife. News of her behaviour would quickly travel to all the provinces. Something had to be done about it urgently.

When the test had come, Vashti had proved to be unfit to handle responsibility. The moment she had refused to obey, she had lost any right to reign over others. She had failed in the very purpose for which authority had been given. What had commenced as an eagerness to carry out the King's wishes had turned out to be an opportunity to 'do her own thing'. 'She had chosen to please herself instead of serving the one who had entrusted her with this privilege.

In spite of his anger, the King acted with great restraint. He made no hasty decision, but first consulted his wise men who were experts in the law of the land. This demonstrated his ability to

handle authority in the right way. They were concerned that justice should be seen to be done. Vashti had not only offended her husband, but wronged everyone in the land. As Queen she must recognize the responsibility of her position. The verdict was inevitable: Vashti could no longer wear the crown.

Shouldn't she have been given a second chance? Was it really fair to rob her other crown for just one mistake, forgetting all her previous successes? But Vashti was not really being robbed; she was being given her freedom. When the choice had come to serve the king or please herself, she had chosen herself. How could the King trust her again after she had shown such disrespect towards him? The harmony of their relationship had ended. Furthermore the same thing would happen in every family, wherever the wives followed Vashti's example. Men throughout the land were urged to take their place of headship in the home, in order to prevent any further disrespect and disorder.

Are we to conclude that the failure of one woman to handle authority aright means that no woman can succeed? By no means, for our story does not end with Vashti; the real woman of authority had yet to emerge. Everyone recognized that another queen would need to be found-but not until the men were firmly in control once more.

When someone in a position of prominence rebels it is obvious for all to see. Because of her status Vashti's faults could not be hidden, but we cannot assume that the lessons don't apply to us just because we are in a different position. The authority we are to exercise in the kingdom of God has nothing to do with position. It is the fruit of reigning in life.

I can only be used to demonstrate the beauty and glory of the kingdom of God if I am free from a Vashti mentality. Though she lived in a day and age vastly different from our own, we still find the same traits in the attitude of some Christians today. Where there is a genuine desire to serve God with a pure heart recognizing these traits is the first step to being released from them. That is why we will consider what this means in the next chapter.

3. Removing the Veneer

Esther 1

The words 'she was lovely to look at' give us a brief glimpse of Vashti.¹ As far as we know it was the only reason she had been given a crown to wear. The King had seen her beauty and had chosen her as worthy of honour. Her crown was a recognition of the beauty of her womanhood. No man could wear that crown; it was a woman's privilege.

It is a privilege to be a woman, for God has endowed us with beautiful qualities that are worthy of honour. The 'woman's touch' is something to be proud of, to be offered as a gift with which to serve others. By this we bring a warmth and caring quality of life that permeates the sphere around us. Some of us have the art of transforming the plainest of homes with a few flowers. Womanhood is designed by God to be attractive, but with something much more than outward beauty. It is only seen at its best when accompanied by beauty of character.

The King must surely have expected Vashti to be a woman whose character matched her appearance. Who else would make a worthy queen? In those early years of his reign he had no reason to suspect any flaw in her, because she was outwardly a model of how a queen should behave. The hidden traits of self-will and rebellion remained camouflaged by her lovely appearance. Then came the eventful day when the king expressed his desire to let others see the beauty other womanhood, for which he counted her worthy of a royal crown.

That day, the camouflage was torn away and the true state of Vashti's heart revealed. In one rebellious act she threw away her crown. Taking charge of the women's banquet she had tasted her new power. Why should she always have to give way to the wishes other husband? Why be just a woman! She was despising the very thing that was her greatest asset.

In so doing she lost a golden opportunity to influence men as well as women. By her very presence as the first woman of the realm she could have challenged them to aspire to be better men, worthy of their own women.

What we are as women either corrupts or inspires the men in our lives. Eve influenced Adam to disobey God² and Solomon's wives turned his heart away.³ Deborah inspired Israel to victory.⁴ Timothy's grandmother and mother inspired him to be a man of faith.⁵

Scripture teaches us that submission is not weakness, but the most powerful influence a woman can exert.⁶ No wonder God desires to set us free from teaching on submission which is merely legalistic and outward. This is no more than a veneer that becomes a straight-jacket. We feel hemmed in, stifled, unable to express ourselves, and very vulnerable to the suggestion that a woman is really a second-class citizen. Just an everyday incident may be our opportunity to say from the heart, 'Your will be done, not mine,' and step out of our straight-jacket into freedom.

Let me tell you about a friend of mine whom I will call Ann. Like many young mothers she had her moments of feeling the pressure other circumstances. The constant demands of little children shut her in and restricted her. She longed to be able to do her own thing-just for a change. Despite two small children to care for she had a strong desire to return to her old job of nursing, for just one night a week.

It all sounded so reasonable as she talked it over with her husband. The children would enjoy having their father to look after them the next day while she slept. She was quite sure she could cope, that no one would suffer, and of course the family would benefit from the extra money. Her husband was ready to bear the extra burden (his job made it possible), but they felt they must

first of all share it with their friends, an elder of the church and his wife. Seeing no obvious flaw, these both approved the idea.

Ann was delighted and excited at the prospect of being back in her old job once more. She was acting with the blessing of her husband and the elder – how much better than just doing her own thing. She felt spiritually on top as she started the job. It was great to taste the freedom from home chores for a few hours each week.

At first all went well, but then the strain began to show. Ann brushed aside any suggestion that it was proving too much for her and her husband. She was quite sure she was doing the right thing and all would be well. But it became obvious to the elder and his wife that the family was suffering. Ann was counseled to either give up the job or work only one night a month.

She was highly indignant and completely unable to see the wisdom of this counsel. After all, she had submitted the whole thing to them in the first place. Of course she was doing God's will by continuing. Her mind persisted with all the arguments for justifying her course of self-pleasing. She found herself resenting the attitude of her husband and their friends, and unable to listen to them.

A miserable week followed. The elation she had felt over her new job had burst like a balloon. Her spiritual life had plummeted and her heart began to long for the old joy and peace to be restored. So when her husband suggested she should personally seek the Lord, to hear what he had to say, she was ready to do so. That proved to be the turning point.

Is this job really important to you? Aren't your family and your life in God much more important? These were the questions God put to her. She knew the answers. The moment she said, 'Yes Lord,' peace came flooding back. No longer did Ann want to go her own way.

Gladly she gave up her nursing and to her amazement she found that her whole attitude had changed. She could not understand why she had ever been so stubborn about the matter. By allowing her to have her own way, while seeming to submit to others, God had opened the door for the real test. It was much harder to stop once she had enjoyed her freedom. That freedom was short-lived, ending in misery. But when her heart gladly said no to self and embraced the will of God, she walked in a new and lasting freedom. This is always the fruit of real heart submission.

The symptoms of rebellion are part of human nature affecting us all. Open rebellion is easy to diagnose and to condemn, but we need to be on the alert for its more subtle forms, especially those that undermine our ability to enjoy our womanhood. Sometimes young women have told me how much they are looking forward to marriage. Then, in almost the same breath, they have declared, 'But I don't want to lose my identity and my independence.'

Such a statement stems from a false concept of marriage. We do not lose our identity, but find a new one. The independent spirit will rob a woman of finding this new identity which can only be experienced by real harmony with her husband. Those who cling onto their independence are treading on dangerous ground. They are following the Vashti trail.

It is so easy to make unhappy circumstances the excuse for feelings of rebellion.

Helen was like this. Her whole spirit rebelled at the way her father domineered her mother. She left home determined never to be dominated by any man. Happy marriage to a loving husband was not enough to root out this attitude and the fear that went with it.

Her life was always up and down like a switchback. Then she and her husband went through deep waters in their relationship with God and with each other. Like so many other couples, it seemed as if they could never make it together. When one was up the other was always down.

During a long period when her husband went through a bad patch, Helen amazed us all by the way she coped. She seemed to be spiritually strong and the mainstay of her family. All during this time she felt very secure in God. But when her husband came into a new place with the Lord, Helen found herself feeling so very insecure and battling with the old difficulties.

The answer lay deep within her spirit, for she could not truly submit in her heart to her husband. As long as he was away from God, she could take charge, but once he was restored, the old fear of domination took over. This in turn opened the door once more to a rebellious spirit that was sapping her spiritual life. Helen herself recognized the relevance of Vashti to her own need.

Though God has greatly used Helen and her husband individually, he purposes to use them together in a much greater way. They could be an instrument of blessing to help others struggling with similar difficulties. It all hinges on accepting that woman's crown, and taking her place without fear as a woman alongside her husband.

There is a safeguard provided by God to prevent us following in Vashti's footsteps. It is learning the joy of relationship, of belonging to the body of Christ. Because she chose to be a law unto herself, Vashti lost her relationship as well as her crown – yet another lesson to learn from this unhappy queen.

4. Don't Go It Alone

Esther 1

The beginning of the book of Esther is really all about a mammoth advertising campaign – the Persian King's campaign to display the wealth of his kingdom. He could not do it alone. He needed lots of people to help him, and the success of the campaign hinged on how well they worked together. Who better to help him than his lovely wife? She could be such a good advertisement for his kingdom.

Then we are allowed a most revealing peep behind the scenes. Vashti was doing fine outwardly until she tripped up over this very issue of working together in harmony. She fell into the trap laid by the independence of her own heart. However successful she had been at first, the moment she took things into her own hands by refusing the King's command, she was no longer part of his advertising campaign. Instead she was promoting herself in a manner that led to her downfall.

God has ordained a much more extensive advertising campaign lasting until Jesus comes again. The purpose is to display the glories of his kingdom, so that whoever will may come, and be saved. This is too big a job for individuals. It requires a people specially chosen and equipped. 'You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.'⁷

Some of us have been serving the Lord very earnestly, no doubt sacrificially, but as individuals. We may even be a law unto ourselves. Because we have served wholeheartedly, God who sees the heart delights to use us, but the fact that we have been fruitful in the past is no criterion for the future. A time of change has arrived. All over the world God is saying, 'Get it together.' God has chosen us to be a people who demonstrate an alternative life-style, and are truly one. We are God's army, fighting to establish his rule on earth. Individual soldiers engaging in their own little battles are no threat to Satan – whereas God's army is invincible. Jesus prayed for us to be one, so don't let's hinder the fulfilment of that prayer by an attitude of independence.

In our national newspapers there appeared an amazing story of courage. While busy out in the fields, an agricultural worker suffered a terrible injury. His arm was completely severed from his body, but he had the presence of mind to pick it up and run with it to the farmhouse half a mile away. There he collapsed, but help was available to rush him to hospital. Surgeons worked for eight hours to perform a marvellous operation, joining all the nerves and tissues of the arm back to the body.

All the time the arm lay on the ground it was useless, but as a result of the skill of the surgeons, there was hope of regaining its use once more. How important it is to know where we are to be joined in order to function effectively. Paul makes it very plain that we are each a part of the body of Christ on earth.⁸ Jesus Christ is the head of his body and he needs each one of us to work together carrying out his will on earth.

What does this mean in reality for us as women? God's word is very practical. It tells us that we are eyes or ears, hands or feet, and together we make up the whole body. Everyone is important and everyone is needed. No one can be spared. If I am a hand, then I need to be joined, not only to a wrist, but a nervous system too, so that the head can tell me what to do. I need to belong to a local expression of the body of Christ.

God has used all sorts of organizations in the past, and still does, that are specifically brought into being for a task, such as reaching some needy part of our community, or pioneering

evangelism. We can praise God for the tremendous work that has been accomplished. Very often men and women have laboured in these spheres without the backing and support of their church.

For a number of years my husband and I were responsible for a ministry to such workers. We provided them with tapes and literature in response to their desire to be fed and nourished, because they were constantly giving out to others. Then, as God began to teach us more about the need for real relationships based on a local church, we shared this message. The most secure workers – especially among women – were those who knew they were labouring with the covering love and care of their home church.

Others, perhaps enjoying a measure of independence and the freedom it gave, seemed to be coping well until the time came to face retirement. Only those who have experienced the sudden change, from being involved in a thriving work to adjusting to living at home again, can appreciate its problems. Loneliness, homelessness, a feeling of being unwanted, a stranger in a changing society. All this can be a depressing experience. But to return home to a loving, caring group who have prayed for you and shared your burden over the years is a tremendous security. God has not planned that any of us should be loners.

It is not only the overseas worker who is in danger of being a loner. There are women today who will go to endless trouble to be involved in an attractive ministry, but are not available to be used in their own local church. Sometimes they are so independent in their own ways, that their pastors confess to being relieved these dear ladies are not available!

We may have a great desire to reach our unsaved neighbours, and be brimming with ideas, but seeking to put these into practice without the prayer support and co-operation of our church will be hard work. We need others to share the burden and add their talents. They will be encouraged by our enthusiasm. And the new converts will experience the warmth of a loving church straight away.

Let us be flexible and ready for change. Independence can manifest itself in an unwillingness to give up some work we have done successfully for years. Many a ministry has lost its effectiveness by being continued long after God's purpose for it has been accomplished. It needs grace and humility to know when to stop. If we are willing to listen, those who are close to us and love us enough may feel free to tell us. But if we are loners, no one can do this, and years of energy may be poured into what is no longer God's best.

'Father, make us one.' We sing about it. We pray for it. We know it's going to happen, because Jesus prayed for it. But we can also do something about it, by making sure our life-style really is demonstrating this desire. Jesus said this would be the best way to advertise his kingdom, and the way in which to reach the world.⁹ Let us look carefully at all our activities and pray for grace to recognize where we need to make adjustments because we are functioning in independence.

Husbands and wives have a unique privilege, as together they can demonstrate the harmony of a loving relationship. Vashti lost her opportunity because she was so wrapped up in her own sphere. God has called us as wives to be helpers to our husbands, to support and encourage them in their jobs. This is our first and most important ministry. We read about some very happy marriages in the secular world, where both husband and wife each have their own career. They meet for meals and for relaxation together, share the responsibility of home and family, apparently without discord.

Some Christian marriages are just like that – two people each with their own ministry who live happily together in the same home, eating and sleeping and going to church together. On the surface everything seems fine, but there is always a missing element. God has a much better plan

than the way the world may demonstrate successful marriage. Scripture teaches us that woman was created to be a companion and helper for her husband, to be alongside him so that *his* ministry is enhanced.¹⁰ The two are to be one flesh, and that surely means one united ministry.

Problems arise when a gifted woman spends the majority of her time using her particular gifts, but neglecting her husband's needs. If her husband is outwardly less gifted, it will create a barrier between them. How thrilling it is when a woman chooses to sacrifice her own ministry involvement, in order to give priority to being the wife her husband needs. Those who make this difficult decision always find that the joy of seeing their husbands develop in their own sphere far outweighs any sacrifice involved.

God won't waste these women's gifts. He will use them in a richer way. Working together produces more fruit than working separately. I can think of a husband who was apparently nowhere spiritually, while his wife was forging ahead serving the Lord on her own. It was only when she began to put him first that he blossomed into a mature man of God.

Everybody benefits when we start to live God's way, not least ourselves. In our early married days, my husband and I could have been labelled independent full-time workers and accountable to no one. We served the Lord earnestly and looked to him alone for all our needs. Now as we look back we realize we were missing so much. God has taught us over many years how much better it is to be part of a local church and to work with others who share our vision.

Being together with someone else can be so stimulating and encouraging. Scripture tells us that when we get together we spur one another on, and provoke to love and good works as well as encourage each other.¹¹ I have been proving this recently in a very enjoyable way.

It all began when I noticed, as I went walking with my husband, that the local hills seemed to be getting steeper and my legs were tiring more quickly. I prided myself on being pretty fit for my age, so did not like to admit this at first. At the same time most of my clothes seemed to have mysteriously shrunk round the waist-line. Eventually honesty prevailed, and I shared with a friend that I needed to do something about this. Many times I had resolved to take more regular exercise, and cut down on eating, but my efforts were inconsistent and the results minimal.

To my delight she confessed to a similar problem, so together we determined to do something about it. We began going for a jog-walk together for half an hour before breakfast. It was hard work at first, but neither of us wanted to let the other one down. We provoked each other to try a bit harder, to jog a bit further. The weather was glorious at the time, which made it easier, but we knew God had been teaching us so much as we did this together that we wouldn't want to stop when it became wintry.

When we had enough breath, we talked about the things we were learning, sharing our joys and our burdens. Not only were the hills getting flatter and my clothes fitting better, but I was enjoying the spiritual benefit of having a friend who could spur me on. I understood more clearly what a lot Vashti was losing when she chose to go her own way.

The Persian rulers recognized that this woman spoiled their advertising campaign. The right kind of woman was needed to be queen of the realm. Little did they know that God was already preparing that woman. It is stimulating to see how he was doing this for we learn so much of how we too can be God's women. The next chapters in Esther tell us just what kind of a woman is God's choice for his great advertising campaign.

5. A Time of Adjustment

Esther 1

Who would have thought a beautiful woman could create a crisis that threatened a nation? Once the Queen's throne was vacant, the men heaved a sigh of relief. Getting rid of Vashti did not take long. Dealing with her influence on the women was to be much more demanding. A time of adjustment was called for. They must tackle the matter thoroughly or there would be 'no end of disrespect and discord'.¹²

To ensure that every woman understood what was happening, messengers carried the news to every province. The Queen was to be replaced by someone more worthy. But before this could happen, all women must learn to respect their husbands, and men must rule over their own households.¹³ In other words it was time to adjust their relationships. Then the way would be open for a new queen to reign. She must be one whose attitude needed no further adjustment.

This is a perfect picture of what is already taking place in God's kingdom today. A new harmony is being experienced in Christian homes as husbands take their position of headship, becoming the men God intended them to be. Wives are finding a new security and delight in submitting to their husbands who rule lovingly over their families. Men are increasing in stature, encouraged by the support of the women to exercise new ministries. Single women are being valued and appreciated as women. They have a very special role alongside other women, as well as using their talents in corporate activities such as in evangelistic teams.

The stage was being set during this period of adjustment for the new Queen to emerge. Let us keep this aim before us, if we are experiencing a time of adjustment which is sometimes painful. Working out in everyday life what it means to be free of a Vashti mentality takes time. Suddenly we find ourselves facing battles deep within that we never experienced when we were doing our own thing. Patience is needed, and faith to draw from the abundant supply of the grace of God available to us. There is a throne to be occupied. Every victory is a stepping stone to a new place of freedom and authority.

Not only had the need been uncovered for a change of attitude among the women, but also among the men. In that Persian kingdom the failure of some men to be rulers in their homes had opened the way for their women to take over. It was more than likely that whole households would have suffered if the women had not stepped into the gap. We have seen the same thing in the history of the church. God uses women when men fail in their role, but it is always with the better way in view.

Where would Israel have been without a Deborah to inspire the men to rout the enemy? She was actually leading the nation. Was there no man willing to do so? Deborah gave Barak every opportunity to take the lead, but he lacked the courage to do so without her.¹⁴ In spite of this Barak's name is among the heroes of faith in Hebrews 11. So Deborah's example eventually provoked him to be a man.

Problems arise when modern 'Deborahs', who have filled a gap, are then unwilling to hand over when men are raised up. It requires a lot of grace and humility to do so, but the reward is worth it. I know of some lovely women working in pioneer situations, who have done just that. They have led young men to the Lord, disciplined them and trained them in the ways of God. Then when they have seen these men mature into responsible leaders, they have stood aside, graciously taking their own God-appointed place. What greater joy and reward could they have than to see the leadership undertaken by those they have led to Christ? If they had refused to let go of the

reins, those men would either have diminished in stature or found their role of leadership elsewhere.

We are living in a time of awakening. The church is coming alive. God's men are taking their rightful place of leadership. There is no longer any need for women to bear the strain of doing the men's job. We can look forward to finding a completely new place of authority, reigning but not ruling. All this should provoke us to discard every hindrance and set our sights on that vacant throne.

During the period of adjustment the atmosphere was somewhat strained, as men and women sought to 'obey the rules'. It was four years since the Queen had vacated the throne, which implied that the King was not satisfied that everyone was fulfilling his demands. Human nature remains the same. The pressures those women experienced were no different from our own as they struggled to submit. It was a pressure to keep up the 'I oughts' and 'I musts'.

Let us beware of bringing upon ourselves a similar strain by adopting a legalistic attitude towards submission. This vital scriptural principle is designed to bring us into a rest of spirit that is the very opposite to the works of 'law'. God does not lay upon us a heavy burden of rules that must be kept in order to be submissive women. Jesus himself is our example, because he delighted to do his Father's will. We show our love for our Saviour by doing his commands.¹⁵ Submission that is not based on a love relationship with our Lord causes painful joints in the body of Christ. The lubricating fluid of love is missing.

'I will do what you say, but don't blame me when it proves disastrous.'

'It's your decision, so you must take the consequences.'

Such words spoken in a pessimistic tone are not evidence of submission, but blackmail! Men would rather work alone than co-operate with the cold 'submission' of a disapproving woman. They would rather have a vacant throne.

No one had been in a hurry to find the new Queen, but now pressure was mounting. The King was aware of the vacant position – he was lonely. Men were having to do things the Queen had been responsible for and it was becoming a burden. The sooner the King found the right wife to share the load the better. There was only one woman in that kingdom who would prove really suitable for the task. Right there in the city of Susa, God's woman was being prepared.

It is time for the pressure to be lifted for our leaders too. They need women they can trust to carry out the ministry women do so well. Only a woman can be a queen. The search began for someone to take Vashti's place. The search is now on for God's beautiful women, ready and eager to serve, to fill the vacant throne. Into the hearts of God's men, the Holy Spirit is putting the desire to encourage women to fulfil their role. Are you available?

'But no one ever asks me to do anything in my church.'

'My leaders won't even let me share some of the wonderful truths I have learned from God's word.'

'I know I could do that job better than some of the men. It's so frustrating.'

Is that the way you think, even if you do not verbalize your thoughts? One day you will have the opportunity to use your gifts. God won't waste them just because you are a woman. Give them afresh to him to use whenever and however he wants. Very often our abilities have to be like the corn of wheat that must first fall into the ground and die before it can spring up in fruitfulness.

Meanwhile God has something for you to do right now. There is a sphere right to hand where you can serve him. In your job, in your family; whatever is your daily work, that is where you can reign and be a queen who is a good advertisement for Jesus. It only leads to discouragement when we let ourselves gaze longingly into 'forbidden territory'. The land of 'if only' is full of disappointments, so move quickly into the land where 'I can by his grace alone' is the watchword. Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart.¹⁶

Before God opens the way for you to use those latent gifts, he wants to release your spirit from frustration, so that you can be free to enjoy your present role. Do you ever grumble or complain? What do you do when things go wrong? How quick are you to blame your leaders for not doing something about it? Can they rely on you to be among those who will rally round to help? How did you respond the last time you were asked to do one of those 'boring' jobs marked 'women only' in order to release the men to do what you may consider are the important tasks?

Those so-called boring jobs are God's means of testing our suitability for other roles. When we respond with a ready heart, showing that we feel privileged and thrilled to serve in any capacity, we are well on the way to occupying the throne. Nothing is more likely to cause our leaders to hesitate about entrusting us with authority than a wrong spirit. Queens are needed who have a gentle spirit, who can reign because they are totally submitted to the King.

Look at your daily tasks with eyes of faith. See them as the first stepping-stones to the throne. Don't be surprised if the next step proves to be quite unexpected. Life is always exciting when we walk with God. God's ways are higher than ours, they cannot be worked out by human reasoning.¹⁷ Who would have anticipated the situation that was to be Esther's stepping-stone to the throne? God's woman in a harem! Surely that has nothing to teach us in our enlightened society! We shall see.

6. The Search for a New Queen

Esther 2

The excitement mounted as commissioners traveled all over the land selecting beautiful young women. The influential families made sure their daughters were at the right place at the right time, looking their very best. Every parent was quite convinced that no one else's daughter would be chosen. It was a very long search involving many days' travelling.

Where was the new Queen? Who would have thought that she was right there in the citadel of Susa! No one gave Esther the orphan a thought. Her name was not in the local 'Who's Who'. She did not move in the best social circles or mix with the elite. She was a nobody, placed in that strategic position by God's design.

How was it then that she was selected when many very eligible young women were passed by? What did this 'nobody' possess that the others lacked? It certainly wasn't influential friends. Humanly speaking Esther had a disastrous start in life. Born into a nation of exiles, a stranger in a strange land, without her parents, and dependent upon the kindness other cousin Mordecai.

These adverse circumstances were the means of bringing her to the place of destiny. Esther was without a human father, but not without a heavenly Father, who had a perfect plan for her life. The circumstances of her childhood could not rob her of finding the will of God. Equally so for you and me.¹⁸ It is our own attitude and reaction, not the circumstances themselves, that can be a hindrance.

How easy it would have been for Esther to harbour resentment at having been left in such a destitute state. We are not told how she lost her parents and the security of their love. But we do know that no festering self-pity and resentment marred the new relationship with Mordecai, that was to last a lifetime. That would certainly have clouded her vision of God's purpose for her life.

There is a poise and confidence that shows itself in the very demeanour of a woman who is secure. 'Miss Nobody' had a secure relationship with God, a secure relationship with her guardian and that inner beauty of a meek and quiet spirit. Esther had not been striving hard to obey the law of submission. She had enjoyed showing her love for Mordecai by carrying out his wishes. How could she not respect him after all his kindness to her?

No wonder Esther stood out in the crowd. Those early days of training in Mordecai's household had added a special ingredient to her beauty. Hers was not just outward attractiveness, but a spirit and attitude that showed in her face. In fact Esther won the favour of everyone who saw her.¹⁹

God had chosen the new Queen even before she was born. He had ordained that she would be among the girls who were taken to the palace.²⁰ As she grew up in Mordecai's home Esther had no idea what an exciting and demanding future lay before her. The prospect would have been very daunting at one time, but when God's moment came, she was ready.

Caught up in the vision of God's new and thrilling purpose for her life, Esther went willingly to the harem. Even though it meant leaving the security of Mordecai's house she still felt safe. Mordecai gave her careful instructions on what to do and she carried out his wishes just as she had always done. Besides this, every day she knew he was close at hand, making sure she was all right.²¹

The idea of a woman of God in a harem seems totally unacceptable to the modern Christian. Surely God could have found some other way of bringing his chosen queen to the throne! Esther herself must have had some misgivings about going into that heathen environment. But the

assurance that God was with her enabled her to step confidently into the unknown. This trial period of life in the palace was all part of further training for her future role.

There is no better place to be than right in the centre of God's will. We may not understand why God allowed his child to be in a harem, but she knew it was God's will for her life. Mordecai would not have allowed her to be in that place if he too had not understood God's plan for his beloved Esther. There is no need to shrink from any situation that looms ahead of us. As long as we walk in submission to our heavenly Father, delighting to obey him, we shall find that his will is absolutely perfect.²²

Yes, Esther was ready to walk with God into this totally unexpected new phase other life. Her attitude made all the difference and like all the other young women who had been chosen, she was thrilled at the prospect of becoming the new Queen. So she would do her best to make Mordecai very proud of her.

God had gone before her, placing a man in charge of the harem who knew the difference between outward show and inward reality. He immediately recognized that here was a woman who was different and assigned to her a privileged place in the harem. Only the best now was good enough for 'Miss Nobody'. Every day she was secure in God's loving provision for her needs.

Esther was plunged into a completely different way of life. During the year that followed, everything was designed to find out if she would be suitable to be chosen as Queen. New responsibilities faced her. She was put in charge of seven maids. Already her ability to cope with a measure of authority was being tested. The new Queen must be one who could be entrusted with supervising the household affairs of the palace.

Lavish beauty aids were made available to all these young women. Nothing was too good for them. For twelve months they received every possible encouragement to develop their own potential as beautiful women. No doubt Esther revelled in the lovely perfumes and cosmetic aids as much as anyone. She enjoyed the luxury of the special food prepared for her. It must have felt good to be waited on, when she had been used to serving others.

Yes, it was a busy life, with lots of things to do that any young woman would naturally enjoy. Yet often her thoughts turned towards Mordecai and the home she had left. Did she ever feel shut in or long to get away from the harem? Was it frustrating to see Mordecai in the courtyard and not be able to invite him into the palace? What kept her mind peaceful when the routine and restrictions became irksome? It was only that vision set before her of one day becoming Queen.

We too need to be women of vision, knowing that God has chosen us. Nothing that has happened in our lives has been a mistake. Constantly looking at the past blinds our eyes, and robs us of seeing where we are going. We too are 'Miss Nobodies' learning valuable lessons specifically mapped out by God, so that we can take our place and reign.

Perhaps you have caught a glimpse of God's purpose for your life and it stirs you with great excitement. Yet there seems to be no immediate prospect of being freed from the restrictions of today's 'chores' into the reality of the vision. Hold on! Recognize that those 'chores' and restricted situations are the very means God has chosen to fulfil the vision. Let your whole attitude be transformed into one of faith and hope.

My great desire on leaving school was to train as a nurse. I had studied special subjects in the sixth form in order to prepare myself. As a Christian I felt sure this was God's plan for me. But instead of nursing I had to work in an office, doing a very minor clerical job, and I found it

deadly dull. I can remember gazing out of the office window watching schoolgirls enjoying the sports I'd loved so much. I felt like a bird in a cage.

Then my parents moved to another city and my hopes rose that perhaps I'd be able to begin training after all. The war had begun and nurses were needed, so my hopes rose still further. At last I was able to go for an interview at the hospital of my choice. To my great delight I was accepted, but told I had to wait for several months.

Once more it was back to the daily grind of a boring clerical post. I did my best and stuck it out, all the time longing for the day when I'd walk out of that office for the last time. The weekly pay packet gave me a nice feeling as I'd never earned so much before, but there was only one thing that kept me going.

As I travelled by train to and from the city, I had discovered something exciting. Looking out of the window there was one place where for a brief moment I could see the hospital's tall buildings on the horizon. Twice a day I gazed longingly at that vision, full of expectancy. The vision set me free to cope with the office routine.

Ask God to give you a vision, to open your eyes to his purpose for your life. You are to be a queen. It may mean going through a situation just like the harem. Do what Abraham Lincoln once said: 'I will study and get ready, and perhaps one day my time will come.' Then you will find that even a 'harem' will be a valuable experience.

7. A Stepping-Stone to the Throne

Esther 2

The harem! Women only! What thoughts are conjured up in our minds at the mention of this secluded area?

'It's bound to be inferior to the rest of the palace. There's a man in charge of course! The women will have to be submissive and do as they're told. No chance to please themselves. Fancy being stuck with all those women! How much better off the men are!'

Unlike Esther we do not face a literal harem, only one created in our minds. This is the product of negative thinking and a low self-esteem, which are so prevalent among women. We underestimate ourselves and assume that a woman's role is inferior. It is easy to forget that many jobs men do are extremely tedious. Nor are they always free to please themselves.

There is no evidence to suggest that God values women less than men. Yet the moment submission is mentioned, thoughts of inferiority arise in countless female minds. Submission is not synonymous with inferiority. Jesus is our perfect example. He was in no wise inferior to his Father, yet submitted to him in all things.²³

We are in danger of being conned by the arch-deceiver, Satan, into a harem mentality. This would convince us that we are unable to make full use of our gifts or reach our maximum potential, and that because we are women we must accept a very limited sphere of ministry, never free to initiate. We then feel the only options open to us are mainly those providing men with the opportunity to get on with the most important tasks.

Fear of going beyond these strict limitations causes some women to retire into their shells, afraid to give expression to their gifts. This soon undermines faith and inhibits growth. Then, when they are given opportunity to participate in a new way, they have no desire to respond. Everyone is the loser when this happens.

Others take a more belligerent line, convinced that there is discrimination against their sex. What can they do? It would be unspiritual to protest like the women of the world, so they just avoid anything labelled 'women only'. Any suggestion of supporting women's activities meets with no response. Unless the men are involved, they assume it must be something second-rate.

How vital it is for us to throw off the shackles of this harem mentality. God has chosen us for a very privileged position that only a woman can occupy. By all means let us stand up for our rights! The right to enjoy being a woman. Then we will be demonstrating and enjoying real freedom.

Our society goes to great lengths to liberate women, yet these only succeed in adding to the conviction that they are imprisoned. We have unisex clothes, unisex hairdressers, and carefully worded adverts for unisex job opportunities. None of which alter the fact that women are women.

Even our educational system has been infiltrated by earnest campaigners for female rights. It is regarded as discrimination for a school curriculum to contain compulsory cookery lessons for girls. They must be free to study the same subjects as the boys. No one must suggest that one particular aspect of scientific studies might be more appropriate than others.

On the surface this appears perfectly reasonable. But if anyone dares to voice the common-sense suggestion that girls are more likely to need cookery lessons, there is an outcry. Perhaps

compulsory studies on 'how to make best use of your local Take-away' would prove more acceptable!

We need to be alert to what is happening in the world around us and recognize the symptoms of a harem mentality. Some claims made by Women's Lib have been justified. For example, they have prevented women from being exploited as a cheap labour force. But this must not blind our eyes to negative assumptions that undermine the value of womanhood. In Christ we have found true equality.²⁴ To be a woman is not the misfortune of my birth, but a privilege no man can enjoy.

For Esther the harem was a stepping-stone to the throne. She turned its restrictions into the chance of a lifetime. Her mind was set on occupying that vacant throne, and no one could accuse her of a harem mentality. No wonder we can learn so much from her experience. We too have the opportunity of a lifetime ahead of us.

Eager to attain to that place of authority a queen occupies, we can revel in being chosen women. God has equipped us with talents and expects us to use them. There are tasks already to hand that test our capability – the things we have to do each day can be viewed in a new light.

Esther was assigned seven maids selected from the palace servants. These women were used to work. They were already experienced in the routine of the royal household. How would Esther cope with the responsibility of supervising them? They might 'try it on' with the young newcomer. 'Oh no Miss. We've always done it this way.' However, her training in Mordecai's household stood her in good stead.

Esther learned to be gracious but firm, making sure things were done thoroughly, and in this way her ability to reign was being proved. Faithfulness in caring for the smallest detail of household management was important preparation for a queen. Those maids were not there just to look after Esther's personal needs. There was plenty of work to be done.

Not many of us are in the position of being able to employ servants, especially if we are as young as Esther. Yet every one of us has been assigned maids to supervise. They are the tools we use to accomplish our work each day. I have at least four faithful servants! They are my washing-machine, spin-drier, vacuum-cleaner and dishwasher, and I praise God every time I use them!

Esther had to supervise people. We are called to use machines and gadgets. Dusters and brooms, pens and notebooks, ovens and irons, computers and calculators, are among the simple or complex equipment that contributes to our life-style. A queen knows how to make the best use of other tools.

For those of us with homes of our own, do we take good care of our maids? Have we ever bothered to read the manufacturer's instructions properly, or do we constantly overload our washing-machines and then complain when they go wrong? A wise woman builds her house by arranging for her equipment to be regularly serviced. A foolish woman tears it down with her hands by carrying on using her machines until they break down!²⁵

Is that stretching the application too far? Not if we view our everyday tasks in the home as kingdom assignments. Faithfulness in handling little details qualifies us for greater responsibility.²⁶ Even the saucepans will have their place in that coming day of the Lord.²⁷ Queens are responsible women.

A stepping-stone is very much 'down to earth'. Our path to the throne is paved with plenty of practical opportunities to develop our skills. Am I more proficient at my job than I was six

months ago, or do I still make the same stupid mistakes? Does my boss know that I will work just as hard when he is not around as when he is there?

These are all ways in which our character is being developed. Esther impressed all who saw her by that extra something that made her stand out among women. Having been given the best place in the harem, she was right in the limelight. Inattention to detail, carelessness and moodiness could not be hidden from view. But her character stood the test. 'It's all very well for her, she had seven maids to help her! I've got no time to fiddle with so many little details!'

The familiar cry: 'How do I find enough time?' expresses the feelings of so many of us. Esther must have faced the same problem. It could not have been easy to keep an eye on seven women at once! Never a dull moment and very little time to herself.

Planning the day for seven women, and sorting out her own priorities, was another part of her training, and no small assignment for the young future Queen! Pat King, in her excellent book on the subject, tells how she made the discovery that there is always enough time to do what needs to be done.²⁸ We need to make that same discovery.

A young woman struggling with this very problem, poured out her tale of woe to a friend of mine. She felt defeated, unable to cope, and even her clock was unreliable, she moaned. My friend listened with sympathy, at the same time asking God for wisdom. After sharing some sound spiritual encouragement she said, 'I think you should buy yourself a new clock!'

We cannot divorce spiritual growth from practical responsibility. The days of preparation for Esther involved these practical responsibilities as well as luxurious beauty treatments. The two went hand in hand and so she matured in the beauty of her womanhood. That's why it's so good to learn about the beauty treatment available for us, that we too may become God's beautiful women.

8. Beauty Preparation

Esther 2

Twelve months' beauty preparations at the King's expense! You had to be beautiful already to be selected for this privilege. As Esther looked around at all the other lovely young women she knew she could not simply rely on her own natural good looks. Something more was required if she was to be the one to attract the King and become Queen.

The authorities were looking for a woman who was worthy of taking Vashti's place. She too had been very beautiful, but no one had observed the ugly traits in her character until it was too late. They did not want to make the same mistake again, so they kept a careful eye on all the candidates – a crowd of young women, all vying to become the new Queen and living in close proximity. It was an ideal situation to test the grace of each one!

Esther's demeanour immediately won her the approval of Hegai, who was in charge. He saw at once that here was a woman whose beauty was more than skin deep. So he assigned to her the best place and quickly gave her all she needed to begin the beauty treatment. The first six months were set aside for a time of cleansing and purifying, using oil of myrrh.

It must have been quite humbling for these young women to discover that the beauty they possessed was not enough to satisfy the King. Not only that, no cosmetics would be provided until the time of purifying was complete. But it's unlikely that anyone complained. Women will allow themselves to be subjected to all sorts of strange processes in the quest for beauty. Oil of myrrh does not sound nearly as uninviting as a mud-pack!

Whatever the ingredients used, the principle has not changed through the centuries. First the cleansing, then the beautifying. 'Preparing to be a beautiful lady' is the caption beneath an eye-catching portrait of a charming little girl. This is the way the makers of a well-known brand of soap advertise its cleansing virtues.

Once these six months of purifying were over, a lovely aroma of perfume filled the atmosphere – no one could mistake the fact. Now the time had come to apply the cosmetics. For six months nothing was spared as the beauticians worked to enhance the loveliness of those in their charge. Esther continued to win the approval of everyone who saw her.

Twelve months of being subjected to such intense concentration on her outward appearance had not spoiled her. There was no suggestion of pride and self-confidence which could easily have been her downfall. The same quiet humility characterized her behaviour at the end of the year that had caused her to be noticed in the beginning. While men had been working on her outward appearance, God had been continuing his work within.

The circumstances surrounding her, constantly reminded Esther of the need to keep that one aim in view, to reach the throne. She had to keep her identity a secret, because she didn't know what would happen if anyone found out. Mordecai's presence in the courtyard every day was a source of encouragement to her and she never deviated from carrying out his instructions. But it still required a lot of courage and determination to go through with the daily programme.

Those very circumstances were all being used by God to prepare her for her destiny. This is always God's way. He uses the normal circumstances of our lives to prepare us, making them the ideal situation in which to purify and beautify. Like Esther, we need to be constantly reminded that we are chosen for a purpose.

If we had to depend on outward beauty to become queens in the kingdom, very few of us would qualify. Even though we may nod our heads in agreement, some of us still harbour a sneaking feeling that we stand a better chance if born with a certain kind of temperament, or endowed with many talents. The good news is that women are chosen in spite of, and not because of, what they are by natural birth.

In his love God has chosen women of all shapes and sizes, weak ones, foolish ones, gifted ones and dull ones, somebodies and nobodies. All the beauty we require is given to us the moment we are saved. Then all the old ugly things pass away and we are made new.²⁹ God who looks on the heart sees us as beautiful in Christ. He has purposed that we should be beautiful women, bringing delight to his heart, and worthy of being displayed to the nations.

In order that this purpose be fulfilled there is a beautifying process for all who would aspire to be women of authority and influence in his kingdom. This involves cleansing and purifying so that the blemishes and weaknesses disappear and the beauty of Christ can be seen.

Oil speaks of the Holy Spirit and myrrh of suffering and testing. The basic work has been done. The cross has dealt with our ugliness, and it is no longer I but Christ who lives in me.³⁰ But the Holy Spirit applies the myrrh daily, so that the fruit of the Spirit may replace the works of the flesh.

Like Esther we may find ourselves with a crowd of women all concerned with themselves. Every time we allow the same competitive spirit to motivate our behaviour and provoke angry words, we feel the conviction of the Holy Spirit applying the myrrh. But a lovely aroma fills the air once the purifying work is done, and words that are full of grace minister peace instead of strife.

'I so long to become more like Christ. I want the fruit of the Spirit to be seen in my life, but I seem to be so up and down. One day things are going fine, the next it's failure again with the same thoughtless word or deed.'

Many of us have experienced this heartcry, or battled with some besetting sin. We see no evidence of the beauty of Christ in our lives – in fact just the opposite.

This sense of failure is all part of God's purifying process, for he is never content to just paper over the cracks. It's always a step in the right direction when we realize we cannot do it ourselves, but need the resources that are divinely provided. Jesus told his disciples to tarry until they were clothed with power from on high.³¹ Every beautiful woman must know that the Holy Spirit alone can give her the power and authority she needs to occupy the throne.

A healthy diet was included in the programme for Esther and is equally necessary for us, whatever stage we are at. We are what we eat was the title of a book I once read expounding the benefits of natural foods. How true this is when it comes to our spiritual nourishment. The right food at the right time facilitates the beautifying process.

For a healthy spiritual diet it is not essential to go to Bible College, or even shut ourselves away for hours studying God's word. Most of us are quite unable to do either. All we need is a healthy appetite and a good digestion! There's nothing like setting our sights on the goal before us to stir up a good appetite. God's chosen women who are aiming for the throne will be eager to receive every nourishing word they can.

What's your appetite like? God delights to fill those whose mouths are open wide. Some of us have been feeding on the wrong food and we've lost our appetite. The purifying process has to sift the things that feed our minds. If we are in earnest it may involve a change of life-style.

Beautiful women don't waste time watching second-rate programmes on television, or living in a magazine dream world!

A little food thoroughly digested is much more beneficial than a large meal hastily eaten, both in the physical and the spiritual realm. Digestion requires mastication and assimilation. The best way to do this in order to grow spiritually is to learn the art of meditation. Don't think you have to be shipwrecked on a desert island to find the time for it. The busiest of us can learn to hear from God and respond to what he says.

However full your life may be, it's seldom you can't find five minutes to yourself, even if you have to shut yourself in the bathroom! In that short time, if you are hungry, God can draw your attention to a verse or a phrase in his word. Begin to chew on it, repeat it, talk to God about it, think about it, pray for grace to do something about it. Write it down as soon as you can, and go on chewing, right through the day, whenever your mind remembers that verse.

You can aid your digestion by learning the verse by heart and by sharing it with someone else. You'll be amazed at the things God says to you as you meditate, and once you respond by turning them into action, assimilation has begun. Joshua learned that this was the secret of being prosperous and successful.³²

When we are feeling inadequate, wondering if we'll ever get through to a place of victory, that's when we need a nourishing bite to build up our faith and confidence. Why not start by chewing right now? Did you know that you were chosen long before you were born, to be holy and blameless? Yes, you!³³ What's more, God undertakes the job himself; he won't leave you struggling in defeat.³⁴

God puts us through the purifying process because he loves us enough to want us for himself.³⁵ His dealings are always perfectly timed and perfectly chosen to suit each individual. Purifying often involves discipline and chastening, which are unpleasant at the time, but tremendously worthwhile afterwards. One vital area of our lives that sometimes needs his touch in this way is our conscience.

'Lord, I want to be baptized with fire.' This was an earnest prayer of mine some years ago. I longed to know more power and effectiveness in my life, to be set alight, on fire for God! The answer was unexpected and humiliating. Instead of being in glory on the mountain top I found myself in the thick fog of the valley. I had plenty of time to pray, but the heavens seemed like brass.

Soon I experienced an almost physical feeling of fire within, as the Holy Spirit began to convict me of things deep within my conscience that had never been thoroughly dealt with. As a young Christian I had battled with sin and been too proud to openly confess my failure. By my own effort I had papered over the cracks. But now in answer to my prayer, the purifying process had begun.

The Holy Spirit is always specific in his dealings with us. He does not give us a vague feeling of condemnation from which there is no escape. I knew exactly what he was pointing out and as I acknowledged it, and humbled myself by sharing it with my husband, immediately the burning sensation went and the fog lifted.

Whatever means of purifying God may use to beautify us, the result is always a new joy and sense of freedom. There's nothing like a clear conscience to add a light to the eyes and a radiance to the expression. That kind of beauty is essential for a queen. The throne is a vulnerable position when the enemy is shooting his fiery darts of accusation around.

Esther had to learn what kind of beauty was most likely to make her attractive to the King himself. That was the adorning she needed, and that is the next step for us too on our path to the throne.

9. Beautiful Adorning

Esther 2

Will I be the one the King chooses? This was the question uppermost in the mind of every woman as she was provided with her supply of perfumes and cosmetics. Esther had already won the approval of Hegai who was in charge of the harem. Would she win the King's approval too? If only she could discover what his personal preferences were. That would help her make the best use of the luxurious aids set before her.

She discovered new ways of improving her appearance, all the time eager to know which would suit her best in the role of Queen. This desire kept her from becoming self-indulgent. Her motive was pure as she applied herself diligently to the task. If the palace was to be her home, there were many things to learn too, and she needed much wisdom. The God who had brought her to this place was with her, and her confidence was in him.

When the time came to be presented to the King each young woman could choose anything she desired in order to make a good impression. Imagine what a headache it must have been trying to make up your mind! So much was at stake, and once you left the harem there was no turning back. It was vital to get it right first time.

Esther did not spend a lot of time debating whether to choose this fabulous gown or that, or to wear those gorgeous jewels or not. Her humility paved the way for a quick decision, saving her lots of anxiety and tension. She simply asked Hegai to choose for her. No one knew the King's preferences better than he did. This was just the opportunity she had been waiting for.

Confidently she stepped out of the harem to meet the King, knowing she had done all she could to be pleasing to him. No woman enjoys going to a big occasion dressed in unsuitable clothing, but she had no cause to worry. It was obvious that everyone who saw her approved of her. As for the King himself, his heart was drawn to her more than any of the others. He had no doubt at all that here was the new Queen.

It isn't difficult for us to find out how our heavenly King wants us to be adorned. Scripture makes it clear that the beauty he values does not come from lovely clothing and luxurious cosmetics. More than anything else he desires an inner beauty that nevertheless shows itself on the outside. The unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit is of great worth in God's sight.³⁶

It is seen in our behaviour, our speech, and especially our relationships. In fact this lovely attitude influences everything we do.

'It's all very well for those lucky ones who are born with a nice quiet temperament. They have a head start on the rest of us. I try ever so hard to repress my natural exuberance and keep quiet. It lasts for a while and then I burst!'

If that's your cry then I've good news for you. The meek and quiet spirit has nothing to do with temperament. That quiet little mouse who always seems to be on an even keel may be harbouring a volcano inside.

It's all to do with who is in control. Is it me, or is it Jesus Christ? When he is in control then my behaviour towards others and my reactions to what they do are under his control too. I won't be all sweet smiles on the outside while at the same time full of tension within. There will be genuine patience, a freedom from hasty reaction, gentleness and loving consideration. In other words, self dethroned. That's where reigning has to begin. When Jesus rules my heart I reign, but when self is on the throne, I don't!

'What do you think of when you talk about the meek and quiet spirit?' I asked a friend.

'Oh, all I know is that I haven't got it,' she sighed. And as we talked about its various qualities we both agreed we had never met a woman who dared to claim she had it! Should we all be so modest or is this another of Satan's tactics to convince us we'll never make it?

If any woman is in Christ, she is a new creation.³⁷ 'In Christ' describes how God sees us right now – the Scriptures abound with these and similar words. 'All of you who were baptized into Christ have been clothed with Christ.'³⁸ And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.³⁹ Surely that includes this lovely spirit of meekness too. These scriptures challenge us to repent of our unbelief and begin to behave like the beautiful women God has made us to be.

Esther had a variety of cosmetics and perfumes to choose from, but she had to take them and *put them on*. All of them contained the right kind of ingredients to prepare her for the path ahead. The beauty we need isn't contained in jars, but in the promises of Scripture. Through these very great and precious promises we have everything we need for life and godliness, and everything we need to become like Christ.⁴⁰ But we must put them on through faith.

I can't take down a jar of meekness from the shelf and put it on thick for all to see, as I begin each new day. But I can submit my whole spirit afresh to Jesus and say, 'Lord, you be in control. I delight to do your will.' That's how, through faith, I put on Christ,⁴¹ knowing I have chosen the right perfume, the fragrance that pleases my heavenly Father.⁴²

When we take a step of faith like that, things happen. We suddenly become more aware than ever before of all the areas in which we need specific beauty aids. The boss is grumpy and unreasonable, the children squabble madly, we receive a hurtful letter – in other words life goes on as usual, but we are not the same.

Instead of wanting to run away and escape to a place of peace, we hear a voice in our ear say, 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest.'⁴³ It's just as if Jesus is inviting us to walk into each situation with him right there beside us, linked together securely by that yoke. That's putting on Christ, but it requires a definite act of submission and faith first.

I had to learn to do this very thing during some extremely trying years of caring for my mother-in-law when her mind had failed. I felt imprisoned by circumstances beyond my control and longed to escape from the endless restrictions. My own resources of patience and grace dried up completely. Up to then I'd thought I was getting on fine.

The hardest thing was having to give up my own rights. As long as this needy one was in our home, our privacy was invaded and our life-style centred around her. A battle raged within my spirit as I longed to be free. Other relatives shared the responsibility, so there were times of respite; but these did not remove the burden or answer the question: 'How long will it go on?'

The dread of coping once more, robbed me of enjoying these respites to the full. I was looking for freedom by escaping, but God wanted me to find freedom in the situation. This began the moment I recognized that my all-wise, all-loving heavenly Father was in control. He was using these circumstances as part of a beauty therapy I had not realized I needed! I was able to say, 'OK, Lord, I'll hand over my rights and delight to do your will.'

The situation remained the same, but I had changed. I had taken the yoke of Christ in that act of submission and faced the trials with a new rest of heart. I found I could even enjoy a brief respite in a way I had never done before. But it wasn't all plain sailing. Every day there were new

lessons to learn, just as Jesus had said. I had to learn to put on the right adorning, to be willing to patiently answer the same question over and over again, and to cope with all the other frailties of a mind that had failed.

In Jesus' beauty school the supplies of fresh adorning never dry up. The fact that we don't always succeed in our efforts to put them on does not disqualify us. Our heavenly Teacher always encourages us in our successes and goes on reminding us of grace to help in times of need. He sets before us a marvelous array of compassion, gentleness, patience, kindness, courtesy, courage, wisdom, humility, peace, love, faithfulness and perseverance.

Putting on Christ will mean putting off self, and that means being willing to change. Dare to believe that God means what he says to all who are willing: 'It is God who works in you to will and to act...'⁴⁴ He wants to enjoy the beauty he has given you, and to let others enjoy it too. Your children, your friends and your unconverted relatives will all reap the benefit.

Satan tries to see to it that your mistakes loom so large you fail to recognize the changes that have taken place. Your family are most unlikely to tell you they appreciate your meek and quiet spirit. They just enjoy having a mum who does not nag, or a sister who is no longer touchy and cross. That unconverted husband may never express his appreciation for the things you do for him. But when you go on doing them just the same without grumbling, that's real progress.

Yes, people may not praise us, but inside there comes a wonderful new rest. The striving ceases and the burden becomes easy and light, just like Jesus promised. We know that he sees us and that's what really counts. Like Esther we can walk free, confident we are adorned aright. When our big moment comes we won't feel afraid, but ready to be used to make the teaching about God our Saviour attractive.⁴⁵

Does all this mean that I must stop wearing nice clothes or bothering about my outward appearance in order to develop this beauty? No, Scripture does not say that. It simply points out that what we are on the inside is the most important in God's sight. Adorning ourselves with expensive clothing won't change us, but neither will wearing a hair shirt!

But once I'm changed on the inside it's bound to have an influence on the clothes I choose and the way I care for my appearance. It will all bear a new label 'For his glory', and that surely means taking the trouble to be clean, neat and attractive, and to look as if I enjoy being a woman. However, purity and modesty will concern me more than the latest fashion.

Authority and submission go hand in hand. The meek and quiet spirit is essential to equip us for the throne. Don't listen to the negative accusations of the enemy who is opposed to you taking your place as a queen. Enjoy your beauty treatment, confident you are winning the approval of the King of kings.

10. Taking the Throne

Esther 2

The great day had come at last. A royal crown had been placed upon the head of Miss Nobody, God's chosen woman. No one knew the real identity of this lovely young woman who had won the hearts and the approval of everyone she met. She had come to the King without any important connections and without putting on a big show. Esther had won his favour and convinced him she was worthy to be entrusted with this honour.

Things were so different from that day. Now she was Queen Esther, worthy of a royal crown and someone to be respected. Everyone of any importance was invited to a splendid banquet in her honour. The guests, and especially their wives, were all eyes as the King introduced his beautiful wife. There may have been no television to broadcast the occasion but those wives would do a good job at communicating the details of the event when they got home!

Esther's beauty was not the superficial variety that easily fades. The King found her just as attractive a few days later as when she first came to him. In fact the more he saw other the more she won his heart. He was confident he had found a woman whose character dispelled any fears of another Vashti. They couldn't invite the entire nation to the banquet, but everyone enjoyed a holiday. They were all glad that the King had found a woman he delighted to honour.

We do not have to have important connections or outstanding talents in order to be influential women in God's kingdom. We need constantly reminding that he has chosen the weak and the foolish, the are-nots, so that no one can boast before him.⁴⁶ Because some of us have difficulty believing this, we have a battle accepting ourselves as God made us. Esther faced this same issue, but rejected the temptation to try to make herself look like someone of great importance. For us the beauty of Christ in our lives is all we need, to be worthy of wearing a crown.

We are not told that Esther was physically more beautiful than any of the other maidens. It was her whole manner and bearing as a godly woman that set her apart. God desires all influential women in his kingdom simply to be 'women, worthy of respect'.⁴⁷ In other words women whose behaviour reveals their character so that they are women who are worth copying.

'Charm is deceptive and beauty is fleeting, but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised.'⁴⁸ This was the reason why Solomon, in the book of Proverbs, describes this woman of noble character as one who deserves everyone's respect.⁴⁹ The fear of the Lord was the secret of all her many accomplishments.

A woman who fears the Lord is God-centred. Like King David, she can say: 'I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand I will not be shaken.'⁵⁰ Her aim is to put God first in her life and to love him with an undivided heart. Everything she does bears the royal stamp 'God's woman at work'.

It must have taken a while for Esther to get used to being treated as the Queen. She could not escape her responsibility to behave like one. Whatever she did became a 'royal' occasion. There were royal requests, royal decisions, royal menus, royal clothes, royal rooms. Everyone knew she was the King's consort. The fear of the Lord teaches us that we must always behave in a manner pleasing to our Lord and Master, and to hate everything evil.⁵¹

The King had found a woman of noble character. 'Her husband has full confidence in her.... She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life.' It would not be long before he reaped the benefit of this in a most dramatic way.

With Esther settled in the palace, Mordecai took his place at the King's gate, among the other officials and guards. There he uncovered a plot to assassinate the King, and quickly sent warning to Esther, who in turn informed the King. She was very careful to give all the credit to Mordecai. As a result the plot was foiled and the King's life spared.

Faithfulness in little details qualifies us to be entrusted with much more. Esther had only acted as a messenger. The way she performed that task facilitated God's plan to save the Jewish nation. Mordecai's name was entered in the book of records, which proved to be a crucial factor in the hour of crisis.

Some of us spend a lot of time answering the telephone, handling information, being a link in the chain for those we serve. The manner in which we do this can convey some lasting impressions. The reputation of our employer may hinge on the quality of our communication. A 'queen' will be gracious and utterly reliable. She won't forget important details. 'She is clothed with strength and dignity' whatever her task. It's all part of promoting God's kingdom.

We can mistakenly assume that being women of authority must entail some very prominent ministry. On the contrary, like Esther, a major portion of our time may be spent quietly reigning in the background. Maintaining her lines of communication with Mordecai, enabled her to be ready when the need arose. No job is too insignificant for us to carry out when it has that stamp of divine authority upon it.

Under Mordecai's directions, Esther grew in confidence. The officials and servants recognized her authority as she quietly carried out the King's wishes and acted in keeping with the laws of the realm. Her new relationship had equipped her with royal power to function. She was not merely a queen in name.

We are called to obey our King's commands, and to walk in his ways so that we too may know his power. Jesus told his disciples that he had all power and authority in heaven and on earth.⁵² Then he commanded them to wait until they were clothed with this same power.⁵³ It is part of the essential adorning for a queen.

Jesus wants us to learn how to exercise the authority of his throne. That's the only way we can function effectively in his kingdom. He sent his Holy Spirit to equip us with all the power we need. 'Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you... and for all whom the Lord our God will call.'⁵⁴ These words spoken by Peter on the day of Pentecost include every woman in Christ.

The Holy Spirit is given to us as a royal seal, something that labels us in the eyes of the beholder 'to the praise of his glory'.⁵⁵ Like Mordecai was to Esther, the Spirit is our comforter, our counsellor, someone always available to help.⁵⁶ Through him our relationship with Jesus comes alive. The lines of communication are opened as he makes known to us the things Jesus is saying through his word.⁵⁷ Through him we have assurance that our prayers are reaching the throne. He helps us in our weakness.⁵⁸

Esther would have been left floundering in the day of crisis if she had not maintained her steadfast communication with Mordecai during the ordinary routine times. We need the assurance that we have received the Holy Spirit just as much when carrying out seemingly insignificant 'hidden' tasks, as for something more spectacular. Then we shall not be caught unawares in the day of opportunity, but we shall be in tune with God and ready to move in faith.

The Holy Spirit comes to us in various ways, perfectly suited to the need of each individual. For some it is a dramatic and noisy occasion, as on the day of Pentecost. For others the Spirit comes

as refreshing dew that saturates them and makes them fruitful. One thing is common to all who receive: the assurance that he has come. 'How much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him.'⁵⁹

Unaware of the mounting tension at the palace gates, Esther quietly went about her daily duties. The crisis was soon to break in upon her, but it would not find her unprepared.

11. The Hour of Destiny

Esther 3

Security had been tightened in the palace following the discovery of the assassination plot. It was virtually impossible to approach the King without a personal invitation, and woe betide anyone who dared to disobey the rules. Haman, the Agagite, had been chosen to keep a tight grip on the King's affairs, and everyone was expected to pay him homage. Anyone who refused to kneel down before the proud and powerful Haman risked his life.

For Mordecai this posed a daily dilemma. Haman was a descendant of Agag, King of the Amalekites. God had said he would blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven because of what they did to Israel.⁶⁰ How could he, a Jew, bow down before this man whose nation God had ordered to be destroyed? Should he avoid the issue by refraining from being at the gate whenever Haman passed by? But then that was his place of duty. Esther needed him all the more with such a wicked man influencing her husband.

Mordecai was not one to compromise. He chose to remain at his post and risk his life, resolutely refusing to bow the knee. At first Haman was unaware of this. The other officials, to whom Mordecai had revealed his nationality, no doubt resented this Jew getting away with it. Eventually they brought the matter to Haman's attention. He was furious.

We may not be called to face such serious consequences, or to risk our lives, but there are many minor issues of compromise that challenge the conscience. It is always possible to take an easy way out to follow the crowd, to fit in with accepted practices knowing them to be wrong. But if we do not do so this flexes our spiritual muscles and strengthens us for the day of open conflict with the enemy. Let us be scrupulously honest, be willing to suffer persecution for the name of Christ, and determine to remain pure in the midst of an immoral society.

As a young Christian working in an office, I found myself facing one such minor issue of compromise. One day I missed my train and arrived late for work. As each employee arrived, she signed her time of arrival and there was a penalty for not being on time. I had to be honest, but I knew there were others who regularly came late to work and were not so scrupulous. As their names came after mine, that day they too had to register their late arrival. I was not too popular!

Once Haman learned who this man was who refused to bow down to him, he determined to destroy all the Jews in the realm. Mordecai had played into his hands, and provided an ideal opportunity for him to wreak vengeance upon the nation he hated and who had destroyed so many of his ancestors. Lots were cast to determine the date for their extermination. It fell on a day nearly twelve months ahead. God had overruled even at this early stage! Much was to take place during those months.

Haman used his persuasive powers to convince the King that all Jews were traitors and a bad influence on the nation. The King rejected the large sum of money he offered, but nevertheless agreed to have the Jews destroyed. Haman's orders were written in the King's name and sealed with his ring. Every Jew-man, woman and child-was to be killed and his goods plundered. It seemed as if the enemy had triumphed and God's people were doomed.

Inside the palace, Haman was in an unassailable position, enjoying the favour of the King. But outside there was a state of bewilderment and great distress in the city. Mordecai, grief-stricken at this devastating turn of events following his refusal to compromise, tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and identified himself with the weeping Jewish people. All over the realm they mourned and fasted before the God of Israel.

Esther received distressing reports from her servants that Mordecai had been seen in sackcloth, wailing outside the palace gates. Her immediate reaction was an attempt to relieve Mordecai's suffering by sending out clothes for him. She longed to use her authority on his behalf, and was virtually saying, 'I will take care of you. Now I am Queen you can come under my protection.'

This natural womanly desire would not have accomplished the purposes of God. God had a better way. Mordecai refused the clothes and restrained Esther from a hasty emotional reaction. That's a mistake we can so easily make as women. We jump in too hastily to protect our loved ones from trials and difficulties, instead of finding out God's mind about it first.

How I longed to do something recently, when my son and his wife were going through a very difficult time. They had launched out in faith to start a new business, with the express desire to serve the interests of God's kingdom. One difficulty followed hard upon another and the pressure mounted. My prayers were all concentrated on asking God to remove the obstacles and to do it quickly! But God's way of love was better than mine. When the break finally came, their testimony was: 'It was the most difficult year we have ever had, but we wouldn't have missed it. God has taught us so much.' I'd have robbed them of a blessing if I had had my way.

Esther instructed her servants to find out exactly what Mordecai's distress was all about. Since no woman is satisfied with only the bare facts, she wanted all the minute details. So Mordecai made sure nothing was omitted in the report he sent to her, including a copy of the edict that had been despatched. He was not the only one who needed her help; the very existence of the nation was at stake.

Taking away Mordecai's sackcloth would not meet this need. The most important thing Esther could do was to obtain help from the King himself. She must use her influence as Queen to have an audience with him and plead for mercy. Jumping in quickly to clothe Mordecai would have simply been the action of a loving cousin. But if she could persuade the King to do something, then it would be Queen Esther acting with all his authority behind her.

Mordecai had prevented Esther from making the mistake of using her position to do something that was simply her own idea. Of course it was right to want to alleviate his distress. Of course it was right to want to do something for her people. But being Queen did not automatically give her the authority to do so. It was not yet the time to identify herself with those who had been denounced as law-breakers. She might have incurred the wrath of her husband.

This was to be Esther's big challenge. Her authority had been given her for a purpose far beyond anything she had envisaged. The key to using it aright still lay in the principle of walking in submission to God and those over her. Now she was Queen she could no more accomplish the salvation of her people by acting in independence than when she was Miss Nobody.

Because her basic spirit and attitude were right, Esther realized her mistake and gave heed to Mordecai's counsel. She responded to his urgent request for her to approach the King by explaining the rules of the court. Anyone who dared to go unbidden into the King's presence would be put to death, unless the King spared his life. How could she be sure of the King's love for her if she dared to break this law?

There was no time to wait until the King might send for Esther personally, it was a matter of life and death. Mordecai urged Esther to take her life into her hands, trusting she would be accepted by the King. 'If you remain silent, then God will raise up another deliverer. You will lose your life in any case. This is your destiny. You have come to royal position for just such a time as this.'⁶¹

Esther had never before faced a challenge like this. All the tests she had come through faded into insignificance in comparison. It was one thing to be a queen exercising her authority in the daily routine of the palace, but quite another to have to risk her life to save her nation. But she was willing even to do that.

Haman, the mighty enemy, had succeeded in obtaining the blessing of the King on his plan to annihilate the Jews. How could she, a woman, get that reversed? No other man in the realm was so powerful. The odds seemed hopeless. But it was indeed God's plan to use this humble young queen as she learned to exercise her authority aright.

Esther had to learn to control her own natural emotions. There are times when the Holy Spirit checks us from hasty action. At other times he prompts us to attempt something for which we feel utterly inadequate. Only the assurance that this is God's will for us can take away fear.

Esther's example, and the far-reaching consequences of her obedience, encourage us to widen our vision. Who knows what great purposes for our lives have yet to be revealed!

12. Keeping Calm in a Crisis

Esther 4-5

'I will go to the King even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.'⁶² Brave words! But this time they were not the expression of an emotional desire to take any action possible, if only she could save the lives other people. Esther had weighed all the facts, faced the dangers and made her decision. Now she understood why God had chosen her to be Queen at this hour of crisis. She was willing to lay aside all her self-interest and risk her life to do his will.

No wonder it was so important not to act impatiently in a time of emergency. In quietness and trust she found strength as she heeded the counsel of Mordecai and only acted as God directed. She could have kept herself at a safe, distance from all the turmoil, protected by the protocol of the palace. But instead she was called to tread a path of self-denial and lay down any such privilege.

God was not calling her to foolishly throw away her life, but out of that inner rest of spirit to act with calm obedience. 'If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever loses his life for me will find it.'⁶³ That is the challenge facing every woman who desires to be influential in Christ's kingdom on earth.

'There is no authority except that which God has established.'⁶⁴ Hence the need for us to demonstrate the beauty of his kingdom by a right submissive attitude to those over us. But if those authorities require us to take action contrary to the will of God then we have no choice, 'we must obey God, rather than men.'⁶⁵ The King had been persuaded to identify himself with God's enemies, unaware of the implications. In order to be instrumental in changing his plans, Esther needed to tread carefully.

It was too complicated an issue to work out by human wisdom. There was only one course of action she could take, and that was to pray for guidance. Even though the need was urgent, taking time to seek the Lord had top priority. Esther gave her instructions to Mordecai without hesitation. 'Gather all the Jews in Susa together and fast for me for three days and nights. I and my maids will do the same.'⁶⁶ She was acting with great wisdom and authority.

Restraint, refusal to be precipitated into premature action without first spending time in prayer, and willingness to deny ourselves, are all essential qualities in order to be entrusted with exercising authority. We also need the encouragement, help, and counsel of others of like minds, whenever we are faced with important decisions. Esther was able to state that her maids would fast with her. Evidently she had won their confidence and taught them how to pray.

Instead of acting alone, Esther gathered the prayer support of the Jews outside the palace, and her own little prayer group inside the palace. To be able to state so confidently that her maids would join her must indicate that they had done it before. Even while living in the luxurious atmosphere of the palace, Esther had not been ashamed to maintain her devotional life this was the key to her success. Before going unbidden to petition the King, she knew she must first petition the King of kings. What could a helpless woman do to undermine the might and power of Haman? Call upon her God, the One who is almighty and who promises to give wisdom to all who ask him.

Let us ask ourselves if we would be caught unawares in a time of crisis. Have we learned to discipline our bodies to set aside times of fasting and prayer? Jesus said '*When* you fast'⁶⁷ - not '*If* you fast'. He expects his disciples to seek him in this way. The time of fasting may vary in length from missing one meal to a few days, or even longer.

Fasting has no virtue unless our motives are God-centred. When undertaken as a result of the Holy Spirit's prompting it has great value. By this means we declare to God and to the spiritual forces in high places that we are in earnest. We are determined to be part of that glorious church that will triumph over all the powers of darkness and pave the way for Christ's return. 'It will be a fasting and praying church that will hear the cry "Behold the Bridegroom".'⁶⁸

Three days was a long time to wait when so much was at stake, but they were following God's timetable. Later events made it clear how much hinged on the exact timing of every incident. Esther was being guided by the fear of the Lord, exercising patience and self-control. On the third day she knew with confidence what she must do. God's moment had come.

She had not received any great earth-shaking revelation, just the assurance in her heart: 'Now is the time to speak to the King.' Uppermost in her mind were some very natural questions for a woman to ask. 'What shall I say, and what shall I wear?' God told her to put on her royal robes and to invite the King to a banquet. And furthermore, something she could not have anticipated, he told her to invite Haman as well!

Had she really heard this from God? Wouldn't it be best to have the King on his own? But whatever God said, she would do it. Esther put on her most splendid royal robes, the symbol of her authority and proof that she was his chosen Queen. Then she stood in the court, declaring in faith to the King and all who saw her that she had a right to enter. He held out his golden sceptre, expressing his pleasure at seeing her and his readiness to hear her petition.

Even before her request was made known, the King assured Esther of his willingness to grant whatever she wanted. By offering her up to half his kingdom too, he was underlining her authority and expressing trust in his beautiful wife. All the officials waited expectantly to hear what had caused the Queen to break protocol and put her life at stake by invading this royal domain so unexpectedly.

They had to control their curiosity for another day, for she said, 'If it pleases the King, will you and Haman come together to the banquet I have prepared?' It sounded very innocuous, but no doubt they understood that Esther's request would not be disclosed publicly. The King readily agreed to this. Esther had been able thus far to cope admirably with everything God instructed her to do.

We have a right to approach God whatever our requests. Clothed in the righteousness of Christ, we stand in his presence, assured that we are accepted by the blood of Jesus.⁶⁹ Esther touched the tip of the golden sceptre held out to her, as if to say, 'I recognize that you alone have power to execute justice in the realm.' A sceptre of justice is the sceptre of God's kingdom.⁷⁰ As we pray we have authority to touch that sceptre, to claim the overthrow of wickedness and the triumph of the kingdom of God.

It was thirty days since Esther had had any audience with the King. I doubt if she had a cosy family meal with him often. She had prepared everything to please him, so that he would appreciate the company of his wife. He had been busy with affairs of state, so she gave him time to unwind. She did not bombard him with her troubles as soon as he arrived. No, God had told her to prepare another banquet for the next day.

As he relaxed and enjoyed the meal his wife had prepared, the King again assured Esther that whatever she wanted would be granted. This enabled Esther to answer with confidence that if the King and Haman came again to her banquet the following day, then she would bring her request. Now she knew her prayers were going to be answered.

'Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak'⁷¹ makes a very good watchword for all Christian women, especially when they find themselves in a situation like Esther's. She must have longed to get it all over with, but all the time God enabled her to exercise self-control and choose her words appropriately. Not an easy thing to do when Haman was there right beside her, and as hostess she had to treat him graciously!

The two men departed after an uneventful, but enjoyable evening. Haman was full of pride that he alone had been singled out to join the King and Queen on this intimate occasion. The King was satisfied that things were going well in his kingdom and proud of the woman he had chosen to share his royal duties. Little did either man realize what an eventful night was to follow. It was the night for divine intervention in state affairs.

Esther herself did not know why she had to wait another day before disclosing her request. As she slept, the reason became abundantly clear. One impatient word, an over-anxious reaction, failure to do exactly what God had told her in prayer, could have so easily spoiled God's plan. But Esther had not failed, and as a result she was soon to see the fruit of her obedience and be rewarded for her meek and quiet spirit.

One more piece was needed in the jigsaw in order to complete the picture. He is 'a God who acts on behalf of those who wait for him.'⁷²

13. The Turning of the Tide

Esther 6-7

'The battle is not yours but God's. You will not have to fight. Take up your position, stand firm and see the deliverance the Lord will give you.'⁷³ God, who had delivered his people in the reign of King Jehoshaphat, was about to do the same again. Esther did not need to fight, but simply take her position as Queen, and obey her instructions. Her enemy Hainan, wasn't aware the battle was still on. He thought he had already won! After all, an invitation to a banquet was hardly a challenge to fight!

How would God intervene to save his people? Certainly not by mustering a great army to overcome their enemy. No, he chose to use a godly woman in her weakness, to shame an evil man in his strength. He did not turn her into a female Samson, but anointed her with his power. Thus equipped, what mighty task did Esther perform? Something right up a woman's street. She prepared a sumptuous banquet for her husband, and invited Haman to be there too.

What next? God had simply told her to plan another banquet for the next day. Patiently she waited. Meanwhile the King had a sleepless night and nothing would soothe his mind except a quiet read of the book of records. Perhaps this was the result of a little bit of over-indulgence! By divine coincidence his eyes alighted on the account of the assassination plot.

It was just another reminder to him that he had done well by choosing Esther. What a mercy she had been on the throne at that time. But wait a minute what about the man who had discovered the plot in the first place? There was no record of him having received a reward. The King's attendants affirmed that nothing had been done for him, so he decided to rectify this at once.

Meanwhile, Haman had gathered his wife and friends around him to boast and to gloat. There was only one cloud on his horizon. Wealth, honour, dining with the King and Queen – these all left him dissatisfied as long as Mordecai the Jew refused to bow to him. 'Why wait,' his friends urged him. 'Build a gallows and go first thing in the morning to ask for Mordecai to be hanged. Then you really will enjoy the banquet!'

The gallows erected, Haman walked into the outer court just at the right moment. 'What should be done for a man the King delights to honour?' he was asked. His reply was: 'Let a noble prince lead him through the city streets on the King's horse and clothed in royal garments, proclaiming to everyone that he is to be honoured.' 'Right,' said the King, 'you do that to Mordecai.'

Haman's face must have been a picture. He had been trapped by his own pride, caught up in circumstances that were under divine control. It was too late to explain to His Majesty that he'd thought he himself was to be honoured. There was no way of escape. He was forced to carry out the King's orders and publicly honour the man he hated. The tide had turned, and Haman, thoroughly humiliated, rushed home to pour out his tale of woe.

Human reasoning could not have planned this amazing sequence of events. God's ways and thoughts are so much higher than ours.⁷⁴ If Esther had lain awake that night her mind could not have conceived the way God was already at work. During the waking hours of a restless night we are often vulnerable to the negative suggestions of Satan. Our minds can anxiously churn over the situation that is uppermost. Before we know where we are, fear, anxiety and unbelief have taken over, robbing us of our peace and draining our physical energy.

The way God was doing marvellous things behind the scenes in this exciting story is typical of how he acts. Let us remember that our God is still the same yesterday, today and for ever.⁷⁵

Nothing is too hard for him. No situation we face need overwhelm us. Esther's God is with us today.

God was indeed working for the good of his people in all these circumstances. Mordecai's uncompromising stand had not been an unfortunate predicament, but God's way of forcing the enemy out into the open. All that was required now to bring about his final defeat was God's woman in the right place at the right time.

It was a very subdued Haman that hurried along to the second banquet. Esther had produced another sumptuous feast and the King was in a generous mood. He urged her to let him know her request because he was ready to grant it. Totally unsuspecting, Haman was filled with curiosity as he waited to hear what she would say.

Very simply, and quietly, Esther stated the facts and requested the King to save her life. She pleaded with him, if he loved her, to prevent her and her people from being sold for destruction. The King did not question the truth other statement. He had never had any cause to doubt that she was utterly reliable. The thought of her life being in danger was intolerable.

'Who has dared to plan such a thing?' Everyone present sensed the King's anger rising. Esther did not mince matters. 'This vile Haman,' she said. It was enough. Terrified, Haman tried desperately to plead with her to save his life, but this only infuriated the King all the more. His servants suggested hanging him on the very gallows he had prepared for Mordecai. The mighty enemy had gone for ever!

The tables had turned. The King gave Esther authority to do whatever she wished with Haman's estate. She didn't grab this for herself, but introduced Mordecai to her husband and explained their relationship. Then she set Mordecai over Haman's estate. What better man could the King find to fill the gap than the one who had saved his life? He gave Mordecai his signet ring and placed him in a position of authority.

It was a moment of heady triumph for Esther, but we see how wisely she behaved. She did not give way to pride, but recognized her own limitations. God had anointed her with power as an intercessor on behalf of her people. He had not given her any instructions to do anything else. She was content to pass over the responsibility of ruling over Haman's vast estate, to the man who was so much better equipped to do it.

How important it is for us not to go beyond the boundaries of our own ministry. We need to know exactly what God requires of us, then we can expect his authority and power to do it. God will enlarge our borders as he sees us walking in faith, developing the gifts he has entrusted to us. We are called to be first and foremost just normal women – maybe wives, mothers, sisters – but with that seal of authority, dignity and excellence on our role.

It was not the time for Esther to take on any other task, because her ministry of intercession was not yet complete. Once again she dared to enter into the presence of the King, and once more he extended to her the golden sceptre. Unable to restrain her tears she pleaded with him to put an end to the plan to destroy her people. Confident now that she had his trust, she begged him to demonstrate his love for her by writing an order to overrule all Haman's schemes.

Tears can very often be a manifestation of self-pity, or a dramatic attempt to twist a loved one's arm. There was no such ulterior motive causing Esther's unrestrained emotion. She had petitioned the King the first time without any tears or dramatic histrionics to draw attention to herself. But now her heart was full of compassion for her people, and she had no thought for herself.

Even though she could not restrain her tears, she still maintained control over her words. Wisely she did not try to dictate to the King what he should do. She tactfully put some good ideas forward and suggested that if that was what he thought was right then she would be comforted in her distress. Yet again Esther was using her influence to enable a man to carry out his ministry rather than taking the matter into her own hands.

Esther was exercising her authority as an intercessor. Her loving compassion for her nation was an expression of God's heart towards them, as she identified with their distress. The tender concern of a woman, used in this way, becomes a valuable ingredient to strengthen the firm leadership of a man. Godly emotions are a blessing when controlled by the Holy Spirit.

Let us then be alert to the dangers of our emotions without despising their value. The fear of the Lord is a safeguard. Whenever I find myself indulging in a tearful pity-party, it's a sure sign that my vision is out of focus. I've set my problem – in other words myself – at the centre of my thoughts, and God is not in view. But the moment I focus my attention on God, my problems take on a right perspective too.

In response to Esther's plea, the King granted permission for another edict to be sent forth. This time Mordecai gave the orders to the secretaries and he made sure that they were written in the script and language of every nationality represented in that vast empire. No one could make the excuse that they did not understand. Then he despatched them by express couriers.

The news brought a release of tremendous joy everywhere the edict went. The happiness of the Jews knew no bounds as they celebrated. Many people even became Jews when they saw the way God had worked for them. And everyone felt it was good policy to be labelled as their friends!

Life had changed for Esther. She was no longer just quietly reigning in the background. Now Mordecai was in a position of authority, and she was a queen to be reckoned with, involved with the affairs of the nation. Everyone knew about their relationship and respected them both. Mordecai became increasingly powerful as his reputation spread far and wide.

The tide of blessing had begun with feasting and celebrating, but there was still more to follow. Esther and Mordecai did not settle back into a routine existence in the palace. They were determined to wipe out the influence of the wicked Haman once and for all.

14. For Such a Time as This

Esther 8-10

Esther had come to the throne not only for a time of crisis, but also for a time of celebration. The effect of what happened during the crisis was not to be short-lived. Generations to come were to reap the benefit of God's mighty intervention in saving his people from destruction. As Queen, Esther played an important role in encouraging her people to secure a lasting blessing from this victory over their enemies.

Now the crisis was over. Esther had successfully petitioned the King to make every possible provision for the Jews to take vengeance upon their enemies. It was known throughout the realm that Haman had been executed for planning the death of Queen Esther a Jewess. Now Mordecai, a Jew, had taken his place of power next to the King. No wonder a fear of the Jews seized hold of the people.

Everyone watched with amazement as the Jews expressed their joy with loud songs of triumph. Only a short while ago these same people had presented a pitiful sight, weeping, tearing their clothes and going about in sackcloth. Someone had said that was the way they prayed to their God. It certainly seemed to have worked! The impact of what had taken place caused people of other nations to want to become Jews.

Suddenly this despised nation had become a people to be respected. Their way of life stood out in marked contrast to the wickedness around them. To everyone's astonishment once they had defeated their enemies, they had simply gone home to rest. 'They did not lay hands on the plunder.'⁷⁶ There was no looting, or stealing everything they could lay hands on. Fancy missing such a golden opportunity to acquire some extra wealth! There must be something in this worship of Jehovah after all.

How God's people behaved in this time of trouble was making an impact on their heathen neighbours. What we do speaks louder than what we say. Our lives are observed far more than we realize. This is especially true when we are going through times of sickness, bereavement, or some unexpected crisis or emergency. That's when our faith can be seen to be the means of enabling us to triumph in adversity.

It wasn't just the sounds of joyous praise that impressed those outsiders, but the way they so obviously loved one another. All the families were joining in the celebration, feasting together and giving each other presents of food. Even the poor were not left out, as everyone made sure they had enough as well. 'All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.'⁷⁷ Jesus knew this was the most powerful way to influence the world around us.

For Esther the joy of seeing her people liberated from oppression must have been deeply rewarding. Now she understood the reason why God had brought her to the throne. The reality was even more wonderful than the vision. Not only was she exercising her authority in a secure relationship with the King, but Mordecai was no longer outside the gates. He was now in a position of pre-eminence right beside her and bearing the load of responsibility for handling Haman's estate.

This made it possible for her to function with a new release of power. Together with Mordecai she planned to work for the good of their people and secure their lasting happiness. Perhaps some of the families in more remote parts of the realm might feel apprehensive, fearful lest the nation turned against them once more. The last task that Esther performed was to minister faith to her people.

Mordecai had written to all the Jews encouraging them to go on celebrating these days of deliverance, and Esther exercised her royal power with *full authority*⁷⁸ to confirm this letter. She said that this was the best way in which to use her position to minister peace and security to those lonely families. By royal decree there was to be an annual celebration, called the feast of Purim. Esther's decree was to be carried out by all the generations to come, and is still remembered today.

This was to be a time of great gladness and feasting, and an annual reminder of when sorrow had been turned into joy, and mourning into celebration. Every family was to be encouraged never to forget the wonderful way God delivered them. They would pass it on to their children, recounting the goodness of God from one generation to another. This message of goodwill and assurance brought hope and fresh courage to the hearts of every Jewish family.

Once again Esther has done something very much in keeping with her role as a woman, not just as a queen. We have seen how every part she played in God's purposes had been eminently suitable for a woman. Now she sets us the example of ministering faith by encouragement. 'Encourage one another whenever you meet together' said the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews.⁷⁹ There's no more effective way to do this than to talk about the goodness of God.

It's usually the woman's role to remember birthdays and special occasions, to buy the presents and plan the celebrations. Women are naturally good at remembering little details. They love to recount exactly what happened at some great event, what colour dress Aunt Kate wore and what little Johnny did when no one was looking! It enables them to enjoy reliving that memorable occasion.

Our God cares for the sparrows and knows the number of hairs on our head. What better way to use this gift of communication than to share the little details of his goodness with others. He delights to overwhelm us with his love by meeting some unexpressed desire. I well remember just such an incident when we were purchasing a house. My husband and I had very casually expressed a desire to obtain a blue carpet to match the lounge suite. We soon forgot about this – until our eyes opened wide when we spotted exactly the right carpet already in the house. Exactly the right shade of blue! It was a boost to our faith.

Esther knew that if the women were involved every year with preparing this special banquet, they would be bound to talk about what God had done. There were lots of little details, divine coincidences, to make it a tale worth telling over and over again. She wanted them to make a habit of it so that when difficult times came they would find fresh courage and hope.

Let us give our often unruly tongues afresh to God, so that they may come under his control. Then this natural gift of influencing others by the words we speak, and the spirit behind them, may be a means of encouragement and uplifting. Let our speech be always gracious. Every woman in God's kingdom is influencing the people in her life every day by this God-given gift of communication.

Do we make a habit of sharing the good things God says to us, answers to prayer and the greatness of his love? Let's talk about them to our friends, our children, and round the family meal table. It will lift the conversation and turn an uneventful day into a time of celebration. God wants us to be a praising people; it's the best antidote for discouragement.

So we see how Esther had progressed from insignificance to becoming the most influential woman in a vast empire. The end result of this gentle, courageous queen rightly exercising her authority can be expressed in the words of Scripture: 'The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me because God has anointed me to preach good news to the poor... to bind up the broken-

hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release for the prisoners... a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair... '80

This is our commission too. We will not be a queen reigning over a nation as Esther was, but we are called to bring the kingdom of righteousness, peace and joy into our homes and families and to influence the people in our lives. There are many who are oppressed, captives to be set free and those around us in need of comfort and hope. Satan may appear to be in control of the situation, but his downfall is assured. 'The kingdom of this world shall become the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.'⁸¹

There are many encouraging signs in the world today to alert us to the certainty that the tide is turning God's Holy Spirit is at work bringing millions into his kingdom. Women of vision are needed ready to play their part and pave the way for Christ's return in triumph over his enemies.

The story of Esther is not just a romantic tale like something out of Arabian Nights. 'All scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching... so that the [woman] of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.'⁸² We must not allow ourselves to enjoy the plot, praise God for its joyous ending and then push it to the back of our minds as ancient history. The message it contains is bang up to date Now is our time of destiny.

'But I don't fully understand what that means for me, you may say. Esther did not fully understand all that was involved as she took that first step of trust and obeyed God's call to go into the harem. But as she walked in submission to her God, the beauty of her meek and quiet spirit became her greatest asset. The vision of one day being Queen enabled her to set her heart unwaveringly on fulfilling the purpose of God for her life.

Let the vision of becoming a 'queen', a woman of influence and authority, free you from any fear of being submerged. Total commitment to God as Lord and total commitment to his will for your life constitute the pathway to glorious freedom. Once that step of faith and obedience is taken, the meek and quiet spirit becomes your greatest asset too, as the beauty of Christ rests upon you.

Like Esther, you will find that the reality of God' purpose for your life will be far greater than the vision. Queen, take your throne!

15. Where Is This Throne?

'I wish I could believe it. How can there be a throne for me? Time and time again I let the Lord down and give way to temptation. At times I feel totally ashamed of myself, but it's no good pretending to be what I'm not. If I'd been living in Esther's situation I'd have been unable to stop myself over-eating at the banquets and indulging in needless luxuries. In fact I could even see myself joining in some of the heathen practices just to be popular and accepted. That's what I was like before I was saved and sometimes I don't think I'll ever permanently change.'

Does that describe you? In spite of what you feel, there is a throne for you to occupy. We will see how presently.

'I never realized before that I could be serving the Lord and at the same time doing my own thing. I don't want to be independent and rebellious like Vashti, so I am taking afresh look at this whole question of submission. I've made a list of all the things I know I ought to do, just to demonstrate how submissive I really am. I'm learning it by heart and sometimes I pin it on the wall by the kitchen sink to help remind myself.'

That's making heavy weather of becoming submissive. God has a better way.

'Of course I want to be a beautiful woman, someone worthy to be chosen as a queen. But I know I haven't made it, so I guess there's still a lot of cleansing and purifying to be done. I must help God speed up the beauty process by a bit of self-discipline and real humility. I'll take a good look into my own heart and find out all those unconfessed sins. I hope I can remember them all! It will be a bit painful, but then that's what the crown is all about isn't it?'

Does God really want us to search our own hearts and afflict ourselves like that? Sounds like the way to become imprisoned in Condemnation Castle!

'Never again will I indulge in a "harem mentality". Of course, all the things women can do are just as valuable as the men's talents. From now on I'm going to cut out everything I like doing that's a man's job, and concentrate on the women's side. I'm good at arranging flowers! What did you say? Pete is an expert flower arranger? Er-em, well I'll join the catering team. Oh, Jeff leads the catering team does he? Well, it will just have to be baby-sitting. You don't really mean to say that Les actually baby-sat for you, do you? Help! What is there for us women to do?'

We don't get rid of harem-thinking that way. God wants us just to enjoy doing things for him as women. He likes to see the different way men and women arrange flowers!

'I want everyone to know that I have a meek and quiet spirit without my having to tell them. Help me, Lord, to show it on the outside! Just to prove I genuinely want to change I'll start by changing my wardrobe. That is something I know I can do. Those bright, striped trousers of mine must go. Pity, they were a bargain, but Esther wouldn't have looked right in them, relaxing in the palace gardens. Most of my clothes are in rather bright colours; ought I to change to more subdued shades? I could just indulge in the occasional striking accessory perhaps...?'

We don't become meek and quiet women by legislation or the wearing of subdued colours.

'Whenever a crisis occurs, I'm determined to behave like a woman of authority. Esther fasted for three days. I've never missed more than a meal before, but here goes. No food

for the next three days! Why do I keep thinking about exotic dishes all the time? You'd think I was planning a banquet, instead of trying to hear God speak to me. It's ever so hard to pray when your tummy keeps rumbling and the children come home ravenous as ever. I'll never make an intercessor, someone else must have been chosen for such a time as this!

Don't give up. Just let God teach you his way to the throne. Start by putting one day aside to fast and be sure you know why God wants you to do it.

'Here's something I know I can do to become a woman of authority like Esther. I can plan a big party like the feast of Purim. If we fix it for three months ahead there's sure to be something to celebrate by then, so we'll have lots to talk about. It will be a bit hectic finding time for all the extra shopping cooking, writing the invitation cards, and I mustn't forget the presents. Nothing too expensive of course, just a little thought, with a pretty wrapping! Did you say something about making our family meal a celebration? Don't be silly, it's got to be something really special.'

But being a queen is all about turning our simple family meals into something special! Rather than plan a banquet, let's pray for eyes to see the lovely things God is doing now which we can talk about.

All these imaginary women have been looking for a throne in the wrong kingdom. We need to remind ourselves constantly that the throne we are to occupy is in God's kingdom of grace. Esther lived in a kingdom where the rule of law prevailed, yet she obtained favour by the grace of God that was upon her. That is how she came to the throne and so fulfilled her destiny.

As we look at Esther and learn the lessons that teach us how to be a queen, we must not make the mistake of trying to work it all out by establishing our own list of 'I oughts'. Nor must we fall into the trap of creating a new set of rules to keep, in order to become women of authority.

There was only one throne for a woman to occupy in the kingdom of Persia, and Esther alone measured up to the requirements to be that queen. The throne in the kingdom of God is already occupied by the only person who could possibly measure up to the standard required. Jesus Christ now sits upon that throne and every one of us who is in Christ is seated with him there.⁸³ We have been chosen to occupy the place where the rule of grace is exercised.

In order to be able to apply the lessons of this Old Testament story, we must look for the revelation God has given us in the New. There we find that we were saved by grace through faith. Now we must continue to live in Christ in the same way-by grace through faith.⁸⁴

Someone has said that rules are made to be broken! Even the woman described at the beginning of this chapter can succeed in doing just that! That's why so often we write ourselves off completely, certain we will never make the throne. The grace of God never writes us off, but goes on working in our hearts. Every time we feel disappointed at our failures it's proof that the grace of God is at work.

The moment we were saved we came under a new master. 'For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace.'⁸⁵ If sin was really still our master we would never feel bad about sinning. But because grace is our master now we do feel ashamed about not living righteously. 'We have been set free from sin and have become slaves of righteousness.'⁸⁶ In order to be a queen we must take our place in this righteous kingdom where grace reigns.

'How much more,' says Paul, 'will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and the gift of righteousness, reign in life... through Jesus Christ.'⁸⁷ When I totally submit my life to the lordship of Christ. I take my place with him, reigning in every situation.

It's the grace of God that teaches me how to say no to temptation.⁸⁸ It's the grace of God that produces the meek and quiet spirit. It's the grace of God that enables me to enjoy being the woman God intended me to be. The grace of God is available for me in every crisis. The grace of God will abound in me so that I can be a blessing to others.

That's the way I will find my throne. As we look at the things the New Testament has to teach us about what it means to reign, the message of Esther takes on a fresh relevance. The throne will become an attainable reality, not just a tantalizing dream.

16. Royal Robes

So now we've torn up all those lists of do's and don'ts, and taken our place upon the throne, assured that the supply of grace will never dry up. What next? Do we simply sit in state, looking very glamorous in our royal robes? Is it a matter of exercising a bit of authority now and then? Just a little to start with perhaps, until we get used to the idea!

Royal robes are not intended to make us feel inhibited, like being all dressed up with nowhere to go! On the contrary, they represent the freedom to live and be what God always planned we should be. He has already prepared plenty for us to do and is waiting for our co-operation. His grace has placed us in Christ, and is sufficient for our every need.

We shall not be left in any doubt as to how to exercise our authority. The moment the King placed the crown on her head Esther received her authority. From then on she was exercising it in everything she did. Whether in little things or more important decisions, being a woman of authority became a way of life. In a time of crisis, or on an uneventful day, she exercised the same authority. The only difference was that the former required a greater measure of faith.

The garments Esther wore marked her out as the Queen. No other woman had a right to wear them as they were a symbol of her position and relationship to the King. But no one refused to carry out her wishes on the less formal occasions when she was not wearing her robes. The same inner beauty that had won her the favour of the King was always upon her. It was undeniable evidence that this was Esther, to whom the King had entrusted the crown. Her authority came from a deeper source than those outer garments. Indeed Vashti had lost her authority because she did not possess this same spiritual quality.

Exercising authority is all about carrying out the commands of the One who has given it to us. When a young woman chooses a career in the police force, she undergoes a period of training, in order to learn how to carry out her duties as a representative of the law. Then she dons her uniform and walks out into the streets, knowing she has the authority to see that the law is observed. Her uniform causes everyone to recognize her authority to do so. But if she decided to go out without it, she would be pushed aside and ignored by the crowds.

Every time I behave in a manner that demonstrates who my boss really is – at home, at work or in the church – I put on my royal robes, my uniform of authority. I don't need to wear a badge that says 'Beware, woman of authority at work!' Unlike the policewoman, people won't have to look at my clothing. They will recognize that it is 'not I, but Christ', in the same way that Esther was recognized without her official robes. I will know too, like Paul, that it is not I, but the grace of God.

Peter tells wives that they can win their unbelieving husbands by exercising their authority. Not by powerful words aimed at dispelling their doubts for ever, convicting them of sin and proving that the wife is right! No, by keeping silent and putting on those royal robes of a meek and quiet spirit.⁸⁹ That is the way to bring God's authority into a situation and see your prayers answered. It requires faith, patience and a plentiful supply of the grace of God, but it never fails to produce results.

But we are not called only to be strong silent women as we sit upon the throne! There is plenty of scope for using our lips in the exercise of authority. We are to go out into all the world wearing the right uniform. Paul's exhortation to Timothy is surely applicable to us as women: 'Preach the word, be prepared in season and out of season.'⁹⁰ Peter tells us, 'But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. [That means put on the uniform.] Always be ready to give an answer to everyone

who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect....⁹¹ Authority will be brought to our words by a gentle spirit, not by winning the argument!

Jesus has given men and women authority to preach the good news and make disciples of all nations. Paul expresses his appreciation for the women, as well as the men, who laboured with him. Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis are mentioned by name and commended as those who worked hard for the Lord.⁹² These women would have been a liability, not an asset, if they had failed to demonstrate the authority of God in their lives.

'We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.'⁹³ Just as every member of my physical body has a function, so every woman has a gift, or function, as a member of the body of Christ. The whole body is enriched and blessed when I do this as a queen, taking my right place in God's order and manifesting a submissive spirit. But Paul also makes it clear that women need to function with authority in the church. In 1 Corinthians 11, he refers to the wearing of a head-covering when praying or prophesying, not, as many people think, as a sign of submission, but as 'a sign of authority'!⁹⁴

Every time I play my part in the function of my local church, I have the opportunity to do so in a totally new dimension, when I take my place upon the throne. And this does not only apply to so-called 'gifted' women. The ministry of hospitality, being a helper, encouraging, giving, showing mercy, mothering, supporting by prayer, and many other ways of serving, are all equally vital. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you only need to be exercising authority when performing some very important task.

Have we caught the vision of a new authority in our prayer life? The key role for Esther was to be an intercessor. It was the most important task she performed in her hour of destiny. She put on her royal robes and entered the presence of the King, in order to obtain his intervention on behalf of her people. She was obtaining his authority and using it in the interests of her nation.

Is my prayer life just a shopping list of requests, or do I approach the throne of God expecting to release his power and authority on behalf of those for whom I pray? Jesus ever lives to intercede,⁹⁵ and he is our great High Priest after the order of Melchizedek.⁹⁶ That means he exercises kingly authority as he prays. We too have been chosen as royal priests⁹⁷ to be seated with him on his throne and exercise our authority in prayer.

Follow Esther's example and seek to be an intercessor. All of us know people who need to be saved and are aware of situations that require God's intervention. As queens we cannot ignore the needs of those around us, or forget it is our privilege to pray. It's much more encouraging to do this with a group who share your burden too. Don't be a loner, but remember how Esther gathered her servants around her to pray and fast.

When you take your place upon the throne a process begins, and every opportunity to exercise authority will be one stage further in that process. We've learned so clearly from Esther that authority and the meek and quiet spirit go hand in hand. Now let us take courage from the message of the New Testament. The grace of God has already begun that process. I can be a woman of authority, and I'll go on learning more about this inner beauty every day I live.

You may be sure that Esther never regretted the step she had to take to reach the throne, nor the responsibility of reigning once she was there. Neither will you. Esther had the thrill of seeing her enemy Haman defeated before her eyes. We shall have the thrill of seeing Satan defeated, and of playing our part in the triumph of the kingdom of God. As we wear our royal robes, we are demonstrating the reign of Christ now. What a privilege! It's much too good to miss!

Notes

Chapter 3

1. Esther 1:11 2. Gen 3:6 3. 1 Kings 11:4 4. Judg 4:14 5. 2 Tim 1:5
6. 1 Pet 3:1-2

Chapter 4

7. 1 Pet 2:9 8. 1 Cor 12:27 9. Jn 17:21 10. Gen 2:20-24 11. Heb 10:24-25

Chapter 5

12. Esther 1:18 13. Esther 1:20-22 14. Judg 4:4-9 15. Jn 15:10 16. Col 3:23
17. Is 55:8-9 (TLB)

Chapter 6

18. Rom 8:28 19. Esther 2:15 20. Ps 139:16; Eph 1:11 21. Esther 2:10-11
22. Rom 12:2

Chapter 7

23. Jn 5:18-19 24. Gal 3:26-28 25. Prov 14:1 26. Mt 25:23 27. Zech 14:20-21
28. Pat King, *How to Have All the Time You Need Every Day* (Tyndale House)

Chapter 8

29. 2 Cor 5:17 30. Gal 2:20 31. Lk 24:49 32. Josh 1:8 33. Eph 1:4
34. 1 Thess 5:23-24 35. Tit 2:14

Chapter 9

36. 1 Pet 3:3-4 37. 2 Cor 5:17 38. Gal 3:27 39. Rom 8:9 40. 2 Pet 1:3-4
41. Rom 13:14 42. 2 Cor 2:15 43. Mt 11:29 44. Phil 2:13 45. Tit 2:10

Chapter 10

46. 1 Cor 1:27-29 47. 1 Tim 3:11 48. Prov 31:30 49. Prov 31:31 (GNB) 50. Ps 16:8
51. Prov 8:13 52. Mt 28:18 53. Lk 24:49 54. Acts 2:38-39 55. Eph 1:13-14
56. Jn 16:7-8 57. Jn 16:13-14 58. Rom 8:26 59. Lk 11:13

Chapter 11

60. Ex 17:14 61. Esther 4:14

Chapter 12

62. Esther 4:16 63. Lk 9:23-24 64. Rom 13:1 65. Acts 5:29 66. Esther 4:16
67. Mt 6:16 68. Arthur Wallis, *God's Chosen Fast* (Kingsway Publications 1969)
69. Heb 10:19 70. Ps 45:6 71. Jas 1:19 72. Is 64:4

Chapter 13

73. 2 Chron 20:15-17 74. Is 55:9 75. Heb 13:8

Chapter 14

76. Esther 9:15-16 77. Jn 13:35 78. Esther 9:29 79. Heb 10:25 80. Is 61:1-3
81. Rev 11:15 82. 2 Tim 3:16

Chapter 15

83. Eph 2-6 84. Eph 2:8-9 85. Rom 6:14 86. Rom 6:18 87. Rom 5:17
88. Tit 2:11-12

Chapter 16

89. 1 Pet 3:2 (RSV) 90. 2 Tim 4:2 91. 1 Pet 3:15-16 92. Rom 16:1,3,6,12 93. Rom 12:6
94. 1 Cor 11:10 95. Heb 7:25 96. Heb 7:17 97. 1 Pet 2:9