

Esther Sermon 1

This morning we begin our study of the book of Esther. I admit that I wasn't really looking forward to this - Esther is a challenging book to preach. But, as always, once God's Word is carefully examined there are riches of truth to be found. We're going to just jump right in to chapter 1, and I'll mix in several matters of background and introduction as we go along this morning. We won't really get to an overall theme for the book until next Sunday.

Read Esther 1:1

“Ahasuerus” is not a name - it's an honorary title referring to a mighty man or ruler over men. And so the author of Esther specifies which Ahasuerus: the one *who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces*.

So the book never actually gives the name for this king. But there are many reasons to conclude that this is the Persian Emperor Xerxes. The primary source of information about Xerxes is the Greek writer Herodotus. And the parallels between the book of Esther and what Herodotus wrote about Xerxes are so striking that it's impossible to ignore. I'll refer to some of those things as we go along this morning.

There is also an archaeological connection with Xerxes in verse 1 when it says that this Ahasuerus reigned from India to Ethiopia. Archaeologists discovered a tablet from the reign of Xerxes that listed the countries over which Xerxes reigned, and the list names India and Ethiopia as the far reaches of his empire.

So this Ahasuerus is probably the Persian emperor Xerxes I or Xerxes the Great. In the big picture, this means that these events take place about 500 years before Jesus. Persia is the second of the four great empires that may come to mind from the ancient world: Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. Xerxes' grandfather was Cyrus the Great, who had subdued the Babylonians. And Xerxes himself made a mess of things in Greece, helping to lead to the rise of Alexander the Great and the Greeks a century later.

So we're in the Persian Empire, 500 years before Jesus, after Babylon but before the rise of Greece. Xerxes' empire was the largest empire the world had ever known.

Read Esther 1:2

This was one of several capital cities that the emperors used, and we know exactly where this was because archaeologists have excavated the ruins of the Persian empire here. It's on the western edge of Iran. For those of you old enough to remember the Gulf War and all of the attention on Kuwait, which is right at the tip of the Persian Gulf, Susa is just straight north of Kuwait a little bit, just East of Iraq.

There Xerxes had a palace complex, a fortress where he would spend part of the year. It was an extravagant palace with cedar from Lebanon, other exotic woods from all over the empire, silver from Egypt, stones from Africa, gold from all over, ivory from India, and so on. Here Xerxes lived in luxury.

Verse 3 begins "in the third year of his reign." In just a moment we'll see why this timing is very important. But let's pause and note that the story of Esther has a lot of historical credibility to it. There are many people, places, and times here, so it's clearly not just a fairy tale or parable. And the presence of so many details allows us to examine whether they are historically credible or not? The short answer is, "Yes, this is definitely a historically credible story." Admittedly, what we know about ancient Persia is limited, and a source like Herodotus isn't entirely trustworthy. And there are things Herodotus says that, at least at first glance, don't seem to fit with Esther. So, for example, Herodotus says that Xerxes' queen was named Amestris, and Esther says she was named Vashti. So we don't know exactly what that means. We know Xerxes was a very immoral man with many women in his life. He might have had another queen in addition to Vashti and Esther. Vashti might have been her Persian name and Amestris her Greek name. Vashti means something like "sweetheart" - it might have been a nickname.

So we can't fit every single detail together perfectly, but is the book of Esther historically possible? Absolutely. There are remarkable connections, from the

historical information about Xerxes's temper, to the glamour of the palace, to the archaeological discovery of the area of the palace where the harem was likely kept, to the efficient Persian postal system. At point after point we discover a historically credible story.

Read Esther 1:3-4

Xerxes hosted some sort of exposition or celebration for 6 months. This doesn't mean that they sat at a meal for 180 days - obviously the kingdom couldn't survive if all of the important people were off work for six months. But for six months there was a great celebration of Xerxes and a great display of his glory. There may have been many banquets, as officials from all over the kingdom came in different groups to honor Xerxes.

It's obvious from verse 3 that Xerxes was up to something. He was bringing in all of the important people, including the military. He was trying to build his base, garner support, show his leaders how much he had to offer them if they'd be loyal to him. This was not a generous ruler who decided to be generous to his people by hosting a feast. This was a selfish dictator who was up to something. And Herodotus tells us what he was up to: after 180 days of showing the riches and glory of his empire, Xerxes presented to the nobles and princes his proposal to invade Greece.

The Persian invasion of Greece, which ended up being a failed invasion, probably provides important background for the book Esther, beginning right here in chapter 1. Xerxes probably needed to garner the support of the whole empire, both the political and military leaders, to undertake such an audacious war plan.

The Persian invasion of Greece probably fits, at least partially, into the time gap of several years between Esther 1 and Esther 2, and helps to explain why the search for a new queen didn't happen for several years. More on that in a little bit.

So in chapter 1 verse 4 says that he was showing off all of his splendor, and verse 5 continues:

Read Esther 1:5

So at the end of the 180 days of celebrations there was a climactic feast. Some even suggest that this involved his marriage to Vashti. But whatever it was, it was an incredible display of lavishness. Verse 5 says that it took place in the court of the garden of the king's palace. Excavations of Persian palaces have shown that they were surrounded by gardens with murals and fountains and large ornate pavilions for banqueting. Out in those gardens and pavilions Xerxes hosted a feast, not only for the great people in his kingdom but even the small people, the common people, of this capital city. You can see that he wanted the support of everyone in his kingdom for what he was about to do next. So verse 6 describes the decorations for this banquet:

Read Esther 1:6

The scene was intended to awe the guests - royal colors of white and purple were displayed all over the place - and remember that purple was an especially rare and precious color back then. White and purple curtains were tied with the finest ropes, supported by rods made of silver, attached to pillars made of marble. There were couches of gold and silver. If that sounds extreme, Herodotus wrote that when Xerxes fled from Greece, the Greeks were startled to discover in his tent couches made of gold and silver, and they wondered why Xerxes would want to invade poor Greece when he had such extravagant wealth. I'm not sure how comfortable gold and silver couches would be, but that was hardly the point. Then there was the pavement, described at the end of verse 6. Though we don't know exactly what most of these words mean, it's clear that for the feast he brought in the rarest stones and gems and made them into something like a mosaic floor for the guests to walk upon.

Read Esther 1:7

Note the reference to golden vessels of different kinds. Not only were they drinking from gold-vessels, but handcrafted ones. Each cup might have even had its own uniquely-sculpted design. The royal wine was lavished into these cups.

Read Esther 1:8

The phrase “no compulsion” might seem a bit odd, but I think it might mean that they didn’t have to wait for official word that it was time to drink. They could drink whatever they wanted whenever they wanted. This is just the kind of law that lawmakers seem fond of today - laws that tell you that you can do whatever you want.

Do you find yourself impressed by these things? Some of you would say, “No, that’s ridiculous.” Others would say, “Well, I have to admit that it would have been pretty incredible.” It’s not wrong to be impressed: our capacity to enjoy and appreciate beautiful gems and metals and fabrics and woodworking and so forth comes from God, the creator of the beauty and rarity of these things. But at the same time we don’t want to be seduced by the outward glamour of them. God gives those gifts for us to use to love Him and love others, while Xerxes used them to get out of his people what he wanted. He wanted to show off. He wanted to feel important. He wanted everyone to be impressed by him. And he wanted their support. He wanted them to be so awed by what he could offer that they would support whatever conquests he wanted to undertake next. He was no dummy: he was filling them full of alcohol on purpose. Beware when the world tries to awe you with opulence - be quick to consider exactly what it is they want from you. Rather than being amazed by Xerxes, it would be better to pity him.

Esther 1:9-11

Duguid (10) “Here we see the dark side of placing so much power in the hands of a man whose only thought is for himself.” He was treating his wife as a trophy, a sex object, something to be shown off to a room full of drunken men whom he wanted to impress. It’s no wonder she said, “No thanks.”

Read Esther 1:12

This shows that the greatest wealth and power in the world can’t guarantee the human heart the things that we think we want most. For 180 days Xerxes looked like a god - and then suddenly got humiliated because he couldn’t get his wife to do what he wanted.

One of the themes we see throughout the book of Esther is the futility of the ways of the human heart, the ways we chase satisfaction. It's seen not only in Xerxes, but also in Haman. We won't get to Haman until next week, but Haman loved power and glory. Like all of us, his heart wanted everyone to appreciate how great he was. And even when he was exalted to one of the highest positions in the world's greatest empire, and even when he had a wife and friends as well as all of the privileges of that position, he was still deeply unhappy.

TURN TO, READ Esther 5:11-13

"All this is worth nothing to me." The CSB translates that, "None of this satisfies me."

The human heart has not changed in the past 2500 years. We still have two choices:

We can chase after our own hearts: the things that we feel will make us happy. If we do that, we'll go down the same routes that all humanity goes down: lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, boastful pride of life. We can chase our own hearts down those paths that the deceiver of this world has paved and prepared for us, like a mouse sprinting into the trap.

Or we can listen to God when He tells us what our hearts actually need, and what truly satisfies. We were created to love God and love others, and if we pursue any other satisfaction we'll end up like Xerxes, in a rage because of how things have disappointed us. Or we'll end up saying with Haman, "All this is worth nothing to me. I'm still not happy." Worse yet, we'll end up facing the destructive consequences for our rebellion against our Creator.

Xerxes and Haman show us the ways of the human heart, and warn us: don't follow your heart. Don't be a fool.

But of course Xerxes was not interested in God's way at all - so as chapter 1 continues we see his complete foolishness as he continues to chase after his own way.

Read Esther 1:13-22

This is absolute foolishness. Verse 13 says he spoke to the wise men who knew the times, as if he was seeking true wisdom. But of course we know that he wasn't seeking true wisdom, he was seeking "yes men" to tell him what he wanted to hear. Those advisers did know how to discern the times: they discerned that it was time to tell the king whatever what he wanted to hear!

And so they gave him this ridiculous plan to, first of all, get rid of his queen - as if that would be of any actual benefit to him. Now he would never see his apparently gorgeous wife again. And then the wise men told him to make a royal law that every man would be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people. That last phrase in verse 22 probably means that in a multi-lingual society, as they had, the men would get to determine which language would be the language of their home. The overall point is that the men would unquestioned authority.

Think how absurd this is: the king makes a law to give all the men the authority that he clearly does not even have himself. What are the men going to do? Get rid of their wives too? Are all the men of the kingdom going to start hosting beauty pageants to find the next wife who'll be their toy to follow their every whim? And not only this, but he is essentially telling the men to act like him, which was the problem in the first place! If all the men of the kingdom act like self-indulgent fools, then making a law that says they have ultimate authority is definitely not going to do any good. Their homes are doomed from the beginning.

Let's be sure we understand that Xerxes' actions here have nothing to do with true biblical leadership in a marriage, and his demand for his wife's submission has nothing to do with what the Bible teaches about godly submission in a marriage.

The Bible would call Xerxes a fool, and his advisers gave him a plan that was equally foolish. Before we're too hard on him, though, remember that our own hearts will carry out the same kind of foolishness. We may not be emperor of the world's largest empire, but if we follow our hearts they will try to make us emperor of our own little empire in one way or another, demanding that everyone else submit to what we want. Oh, if only we would submit to the ways of the creator: love for God and love for others, rather than self-centered foolishness.

But, as verse 22 says, the foolishness of Xerxes and his advisors was spread via letter to all the royal provinces. The Persian postal service was legendary - this was one of the notable developments of their empire. As I was studying this week I came across a quote from Herodotus about the Persian postal system, and when I read it I thought, “Wait a second, that sounds just like the unofficial motto of the US Post Office.” Here’s an English translation of what Herodotus wrote:

It is said that as many days as there are in the whole journey, so many are the men and horses that stand along the road, each horse and man at the interval of a day’s journey; and these are stayed neither by snow nor rain nor heat nor darkness from accomplishing their appointed course with all speed.[3]

— Herodotus, Histories (8.98) (trans. A. D. Godley, 1924)

And so the internet was quick to assure me that, yes, the postal motto “Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds” - comes from Herodotus’s description of the Persian postal system!

Unfortunately that efficient postal system spread the nonsense of Xerxes and his advisors to all the families of the Persian empire. Can you imagine how those conversations went when husbands and wives opened the mail?!

We’ll move on from chapter 1 now, but I hope we’ll remember how it illustrates for us the foolish ways of the human heart.

Now, as mentioned earlier, there is a time gap between chapters 1 and 2. If we look down at 2:16, we see that Esther came to Xerxes toward the end of the seventh year of his reign. Remember that the events of chapter 1 happened during the third year. So several years passed, and it’s quite likely that during this time Xerxes led the invasion of Greece. He may well have introduced those plans at the end of the 180 day celebration, and then they undertook them about 3 years later. So the chronology is not perfectly clear, but it seems possible that Xerxes came back to Susa licking his wounds after it became clear that the invasion of Greece was not going well.

Herodotus apparently describes how he came home and indulged in immoral behavior when his war disappointed him. Again, we see the ways of the human heart, chasing one destructive path after another. So if Xerxes came home like a sad puppy with his tail between his legs, the beginning of chapter 2 is no surprise:

Read Esther 2:1

How could he forget Vashti? Why did it take several years to replace her? Because he'd been preoccupied with a war.

Read Esther 2:2

This sounds like what the king's young men would say if they saw that he was dejected and feeling sorry for himself. What could be better than bringing in all of the most beautiful virgins in the empire? Sexual pleasure will cheer him up.

Read Esther 2:3-4

In the end God used this evil to rescue His people. But we can't let that obscure the horror of what's going on here. The closest modern parallel to this would probably be something like sex trafficking. These young women lost their freedom, being brought as slaves to the palace to be used as objects by the king and then set aside to spend the rest of their lives in the palace harem, just in case the king happened to ever want any of them again. The ways of the human heart aren't just foolish: they are destructive. Following your own heart isn't just a bad idea for you, it's really bad news for the people around you who will be the victims of your selfishness.

Ultimately, our selfish ways lead us into God's judgment, for it's His rule that we reject if we choose our own way. All of Xerxes' display of his own glory and pursuit of his own way was rebellion against God. And God would bring him down just a few years after this. I bet you can guess how he died? He was assassinated. The "wise men" who helped him live his own way were glad to turn on him when it suited their own way.

Conclusion

We'll stop there for this morning. I hope that you weren't bored this morning - not because I'm a good preacher but because the author of Esther was a great writer. Even secular scholars admit that this is remarkable literature. It is, as one wrote, "by any standards a brilliantly written story." As another wrote, "there are no easy places to stop when reading this story." It pulls you in and carries you along.

It's a historically-credible story and a brilliantly-written story, yet it's not just historical trivia, like a textbook chapter about Xerxes the Great. It is historically accurate yet obviously written for a purpose. The question is, what is that purpose? How will you understand that purpose? How does this story, that never even mentions God, fit into the Bible?

I hope you'll read through Esther on your own this week, either for the first time or read it again if you already did last week. And next Sunday we'll begin to consider what the purpose of this story might be, as we look further into chapters 2 and 3.