

Series Esther

This Message #1 Introduction and Context of Esther

Scripture Esther 1:1-22

For the next several weeks we will focus on the story of Esther. Esther and Ruth are the only women in the Old Testament who have entire books devoted to them. Ruth tells the story of a Gentile who married a Jew and became an ancestress of the Messiah. The book of Esther introduces us to a Jewess who married a Gentile and was used of God to save the Jewish people from destruction so that Messiah could be born. Ruth was the key link in the restoration of one family, while Esther was the key link in the rescue of the entire Jewish race. Ruth begins with a famine and ends with the birth of a baby, while the book of Esther begins with a feast and ends with the death of over 75,000 people. Boaz became the kinsman-redeemer and rescuer for one woman, Ruth, and in the story of Esther, there was a man who helped rescue all Jews everywhere.

God is mentioned twenty-five times in the book of Ruth, but He isn't mentioned at all in the book of Esther! Yet in both books, the reader becomes aware that God was watching over His chosen people and working through human circumstances to fulfill His promises as well as accomplish His will and purposes.

It is impossible to pin down the specific years in which the events in the book of Ruth occurred. We only know that it they took place sometime during the period of the Judges, which covered 300 years. On the other hand, we know the specific years of the story of Esther. The historical setting and context is crucial to our understanding the story, so we will spend most of our time today on the historical context. *[Note: A list of dates and events is at the end of this message.]*

The Jews were taken into exile by the powers of Babylon beginning in 605 BC. Daniel was one of those taken at that time. God had predicted, in the words of Jeremiah, seventy years of captivity because of the idolatry and evil behavior of Israel. In 539 BC, the city of Babylon was captured by the confederated armies of the Medo-Persian empires under Cyrus the Great. Three years later, in 536 BC, at the end of the seventy years of captivity, the first group of Jews returned to the land of Palestine under the leadership of Zerubbabel.

The prophet Isaiah had predicted, even before his birth, that Cyrus would be the one to grant permission for the Jews to return to their homeland. There were about 50,000 Jews in this first group of returning exiles. During the next 20 years, the Jews resettled in some of their towns, and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. This return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple is described in the first six chapters of the book of Ezra.

The second group of exiles to return to Palestine arrived about 80 years later, about 458 BC. The scribe Ezra led this small group of only about 2000 Jews. The Book of Ezra, chapters 7 through 10, describes his ministry among the returned exiles. Nehemiah was the third important person to return. He arrived about 445 BC. Nehemiah is famous as the repairer of the walls around Jerusalem.

The books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther are grouped together in our Bibles, and together they help us understand the spiritual condition of the Jewish people. The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah describe the return of godly Jews to their promised land. The Book of Esther describes the lives of those Jews who chose to remain in Persia during this same period of time. The events in Esther occurred between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra, in the year 478 BC, which was almost 60 years after the first group of returnees under Zerubbabel, and about 20 years before the return of Ezra.

When God allowed the Jews to go into captivity, it was because they had turned their backs on Him, and had departed from His ways. Great numbers of the exiles never repented of their sins. The second generation of exiles became rather comfortable as a minority group among the gentile majority around them. Life was not easy — they had to endure discrimination and deprivations, but they were more willing to remain in predictable, albeit difficult, circumstances in exile than to risk everything by returning to Palestine. These exiles maintained their Jewish ethnicity, but they became very secular in their religious beliefs and behaviors. They neglected the God of their fathers, and God Himself remained hidden to them.

Just before the death of Moses, the LORD spoke some words to him that applied, centuries later, to the exiled Jews. The LORD said, “On the day that the people forsake me, I will become angry with them and forsake them. I will hide my face from them, and ... I will certainly hide my face on that day because of all their wickedness in turning to other gods” (*Deuteronomy 31:16-18*). This may be the reason why the name of God does not appear in the story of Esther.

Even though the Jews who remained in exile had turned away from their LORD, the LORD had not ceased to love His people. He remained aware of their circumstances and worked behind the scenes to protect them. His presence was not obvious, but the LORD acted in a remarkable way to deliver the Jews from harm.

Please keep this in mind: the focus of the book of Esther is upon those Jews who knew that God had instructed them to return to the promised land, but did not. The main Jewish characters in this story are secular Jews. The deliverance of the Jews in the story is not the result of the actions of faithful Jews who pleaded with God for help, but rather, the consequence of God's grace in fulfilling His promises and accomplishing His purposes, in spite of the fact that the Israelites were not walking with God.

Now that we have established the general historical context of the story, we must next look at the particular setting of the story of Esther.

Read Esther 1:1-9

Xerxes was the reigning monarch of the Persian empire. Xerxes was his Greek name. His Hebrew name was Ahasuerus, and in the Persian language, his name was Khshayarsha. He inherited the throne from his father, Darius, who was the friend of Daniel. Xerxes' grandfather was Cyrus the Great, the man who defeated the Babylonians.

Xerxes ruled for about 22 years, from 485 to 463 BC. The Persian empire at that time extended from the borders of modern day Greece in the west, to India in the east, and from Southern Russia in the north, to Saudi Arabia in the south. The Persian Empire was, by far, the largest in the world up until that time.

Administratively, the empire was divided into 127 provinces. There were four palaces. Susa was the winter residence. The other capitals were Babylon, Ecbatana, and Persepolis.

In order to understand about the lavish party given by Xerxes, we have to have a little more historical background. Xerxes' father, Darius, had attempted to conquer Greece, which was the growing power and threat from Europe. Unfortunately, Darius was defeated in the famous battle of Marathon near Athens. Xerxes was determined to avenge this defeat. Preparations required more than five years.

The party was the time of strategy meetings for all the leaders of the provinces, who were themselves rulers over individual people groups. In all likelihood, it was a time to rally support and enthusiasm for the battles which lay ahead. The king needed to find out about the allegiance and dedication of his subordinates. We should not assume that all the leaders were present at one time nor that they stayed in Susa for the entire 180 days.

In case you are interested, the conflict between Persia and Greece occurred in 480-479 BC. Both the naval and land forces of Xerxes suffered disastrous defeats. He spent most of his remaining years in building projects at Susa and Persepolis.

At the conclusion of the 180 days of partying, the King gave the inhabitants of Susa a banquet of seven days' duration. Perhaps this was his reward for all the labor they had put into the grand gala for the dignitaries. Verses 6 through 8 describe what the people saw inside the palace and gardens. It must have been an impressive experience for everyone.

In verse 9 we are informed that Queen Vashti also gave a banquet for the women. During the years I lived in Iran, it was not necessary for men and women to be separated during formal affairs. However, in ancient Persia, this was apparently the custom. (And it has become the requirement again since fundamental Muslims are in charge of matters in Iran at the present time.)

There was a specific episode which led to the entrance of Esther into the story. This is described in verses 10 through 22. I want to cover these verses quickly and then we will be finished with the introductory section.

Read Esther 1:10 – 22

Everything in the first part of chapter 1 was oriented around the ostentatious display of the king's wealth, splendor, and glory. As part of the display of beauty, the King wanted his queen, Vashti, to be seen by his guests. And so, on the last day of the seven day banquet, King Xerxes commanded the queen to appear before his guests.

Keep in mind that there were only men at the banquet with the king. Vashti, in another part of the palace, had staged her own gathering for the women. Some commentators have jumped to the assumption that Vashti was being commanded to perform a strip act at a stag party in front of drunken men. There is no reason for us to think this was true.

The issue was one of authority. Persian kings assumed that they held all authority. The entire first chapter is written to show that the king ruled, and that what he wanted, he expected to be provided. When Vashti refused to go to the banquet, she was disobeying a direct command, with the result that “the king became furious and burned with anger.”

Apparently there was no existing law to deal with insubordination of a wife. When the king consulted his experts in matters of the law, he said, “According to the law, what must be done to Queen Vashti? She has not obeyed the command of the king.”

Memucan, one of the experts in the law, agreed that Queen Vashti had done wrong, “Not only against the king but also against all the nobles and the peoples of all the provinces of King Xerxes.” Talk about one person’s action having far reaching consequences!!! In Memucan’s opinion, if the women of the Persian empire learned about the queen’s insubordination, then all of the women would follow her example and none of the women in the empire would respect their husbands. As Memucan stated, if this news got out, “There would be no end of disrespect and discord.”

According to Memucan, the only recourse was for the king to forbid Vashti to ever again come into his presence, to take away her royal position and give her queenly crown to someone else, and to proclaim this information throughout the entire Persian realm. The king and his advisors accepted this advice, and the edict went out to every province of the empire. The edict was translated into the language of every people group, so that there would be no doubts about the fact that “every man should be ruler over his own household.” I’m sure you have heard it said that the laws of the Persians and Medes, once established, could not be revoked or changed (*see verse 19*).

To us, this new law seems arbitrary and unreasonable. However, under the circumstances of that era, and given the position and vanity of Xerxes, Vashti's disobedience was an embarrassment. Xerxes was a king obsessed with power and control. His ego had taken a hit when she refused to obey. He had, as they say in the Middle East, "lost face." Thus it became official policy in the kingdom that the status of wives was reduced to second class citizenship under the authority of their husbands.

All this emphasis on authority is important to the plot of the story, and adds dramatic tension to the events of later chapters. The king and his advisors, as well as the heads of households throughout the empire, might assume from this point on that they had family relationships under their complete control. However, we will learn in later chapters that God is ultimately in control, and nothing that men initiate is able to thwart Him in protecting His people.

Bonus Information

"The Bible doesn't tell us what happened to Vashti. Many biblical scholars believe she was Amestris, the mother of Artaxerxes who ruled from 464 to 425 B.C. It's likely that Esther was either out of favor or dead during those years; for Amestris exercised great influence as the queen mother during her son's reign.

"Artaxerxes was born in 483, the year of the great banquet described in Esther 1. It's possible that Vashti was pregnant with her son at the time and therefore unwilling to appear before the men."