

Esther 06-02-14B

Let's begin our study of the Book of Esther. We start at chapter 1, verse 1. Let's read this section together in the English. Now, it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus, this was the Ahasuerus who reigned over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia.

In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan, the citadel, that in the third year of his reign he made a feast for all his officials and servants, the powers of Persia and Media, the nobles and the princes of the provinces being before him. When he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty for many days, 180 days in all. And when these days were completed, the king made a feast, lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Shushan, the citadel, from great to small, in the court of the garden of the king's palace.

There were white and blue linen curtains fastened with cords of fine linen and purple on silver rods and marble pillars, and the couches were of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of alabaster, turquoise, and white and black marble. And they served drinks in golden vessels, each vessel being different from the other with royal wine in abundance, according to the generosity of the king. In accordance with the law, the drinking was not compulsory, for so the king had ordered all the officers of his household that they should do according to each man's pleasure.

Queen Vashti also made a feast for the women in the royal palace, which belonged to King Ahasuerus. So this sets the stage and sets the background and tells us kind of what's going on. It says that this is in the days of Ahasuerus.

Oddly enough, this word Ahasuerus and the word Xerxes are exactly the same. I could give you the gory details by which Xerxes turned into Ahasuerus, but you really don't want to know. Just take my word for it.

The name has come down, and this is a title for Xerxes, who is the son of Darius, and there is a history and a setting that helps us to understand what's going on here. There was a very famous battle that took place in the ancient world right after the turn of the century of 500 BC and getting down into the 490s. Xerxes' father was Darius I. He was a big-time general, and he had subdued the Ionian Greeks.

The Greeks were not yet the major power that they would become, and they were divided up into different regions and so on. But the Greeks of Ionia were very rebellious and were giving Darius a hard time. So he went up there and conquered them and quelled them and put them back in their place in 495 BC.

Now, remember Ezekiel and Daniel all down in the 500s. Daniel was taken captive in 605. Ezekiel was taken captive in the 590s BC, about 100 years before this.

And Ezekiel prophesied all down for several decades after that. Daniel lives all the way down into the 539 and so on. Well, this is about 30 years after that, 40 years after that.

So Daniel has passed away now, and we're down into the middle part of the Persian Empire here. So Darius I, he got a hold of the Ionian Greeks and put them in their place in 495 BC. But he knew that there were all these other Greeks that kept supplying them and egging them on and saying, ah, come on, rebel again.

You know, if you'll go fight Darius and that's redounded to our benefit. So he decided he would just go up there and conquer all the Greeks. The Ionians were just the biggest offenders.

But he said, well, I just got to go up there and knock down all the Greeks. And this would let him secure his Western frontier. If you think about where Persia is, where Iran is today and all of that.

And they'd conquered Babylon. They had some palaces at Babylon, had some palaces at Susa or Shushan. And the Western border is over there where Greece is.

If you look at the course of doing it this way, if you look at the map over to the West, that's where Greece is. So he said, well, I'll secure my Western flank over here, my Western border. And this will give me a jumping off place, conquer Greece.

And then I can move on and go conquer Europe, move further West. So the Athenians, the people who lived in Athens, remember they're still city-states at that time, when the Ionians were fighting Darius, well, the Athenians came over and gave them a bunch of help. And they had actually defeated the Persians at Sardis, which was the capital of Ionia.

And so Darius said, well, those Athenians have got to go. I'm going to punish them. And so he was so enraged at them because they kind of upset his apple cart when he was putting down the Ionians, that he had one of his servants and he said, look, Mr. Servant, every night when I'm at dinner, I want you to come up and say this to me.

I want you to come up and say, Lord, don't forget the Athenians. So every night this servant of Darius would come up to him and say, Lord, don't forget the Athenians. And he would say, oh yeah, that's right.

And he was getting all upset with him. We have statues, we have inscriptions of Darius. You can actually see what he looked like.

Well, so he began to plot after his servant said this enough times, he said, yeah, I'm going to go up there and I'm going to kick those Athenians right out of Greece. So he said, well, there's two different ways I can do this. I can float up there in boats or I can go overland.

There's advantages and disadvantages to each one. Can't decide between them. I'll just use them both.

So I'll march an army up the land and I'll put a bunch of soldiers in a fleet and I'll send them both. Well, unfortunately for him, this is like 492 BC, there was a big storm and it wiped out his fleet. All the soldiers went to the bottom.

So that kind of messed him up because half of his pincher movement was gone. It's like a pair of scissors or a pair of pliers with only one jaw. It just didn't work.

So his other guys had to come back. So two years later in 490, he said, well, I'm going to try again. And he went by sea again, but he took a little bit different route this time.

And when he got there, there was this big historic battle. It's called the Battle of Marathon. Very famous battle.

He had sent heralds up there. He had sent messengers up into the Greek city states and they had gone up and said, look, y'all better mend your ways and submit or Darius is going to come up here and conquer you. And they would ask for earth and water as a token of submission.

This is sort of their symbolic sign and symbol of acquiescence. They would send some dirt and send some water. Well, some of them did and some of them didn't.

And the two biggest places that did not, said we're not sending any dirt. We're not sending any water. We're Sparta and Athens.

So the Athenians took the heralds that Darius had sent up there and threw them off of the Acropolis. You know, big high place in Athens. I've been there.

I've stood on it. And took the messengers and tossed them off. And they did not survive.

The Spartans didn't have an Acropolis. So they threw them down a well and they didn't survive either. There was plenty of earth and water down there.

And it was a big joke in Sparta. Well, you know, the heralds got the earth and water now down in the well. So the Athenians, there was a translator who had come along with the heralds.

And when the heralds said, Darius wants earth and water as a sign of your submission. They said, no, we won't. They threw the guys off the Acropolis.

Well, there was a translator and they thought his Greek was bad. And so they executed him also. They said, you should have learned our language better and they killed him.

Well, when word of this got back to Darius, you know, this means war kind of a thing. So the Persian fleet with infantry and cavalry sailed up there, sailed across the Aegean. This is in the fall of 490 BC.

Remember, this is Xerxes' father doing all of this. Well, they conquered little islands and things along the way to make sure that their logistics trail would be safe. Can't have a bunch of

enemies behind you.

So you have to kind of conquer as you go. And they finally got up there. And when he finally got up to Marathon Bay and landed, he's about 25 miles from Athens.

Well, the Athenians said, we're not going to be able to lick these guys single-handed. We need somebody to go over to Sparta, the other upstart city-state, and get them to help us. So the Spartans heard about the coming of Darius and they said, well, yeah, we'd like to help you, but it's a full moon and we're superstitious about the full moon.

And, you know, you all are a little too far away. You're on the other side of the Peloponnesus here. And so the Athenians had to fight the thing on their own.

And after the battle, the Spartans belatedly showed up and the battle was already over. But the Athenians, when they came to Marathon to fight the Persians, they had a nice surprise because there were a thousand troops from the Plataeans, which was another Greek city-state. And the Plataeans had about a thousand, in fact, it was their entire army, a thousand of them.

They showed up and joined the Athenians. And so they faced this army of Darius together. So they took up and drew their battle lines and all that.

And to make a long story short, they had a general named Miltiades. Miltiades is the leader of the Athenian army. And what's really neat is they had actually found Miltiades' helmet.

He had a golden helmet and archaeologists have found this thing. It's in a museum over there and you can look at it. It's got all kinds of engraving on it and so on.

But to make a long story short, the Athenians kicked Darius clear back into the sea. They won the battle. The Athenians and the Plataeans defeated Darius.

And this was very humiliating. And not long after that, Darius died. So his son Xerxes takes over.

And this is still kind of sticking in his craw, that the Greeks defeated his father. And so what he decides to do, in the third year of his reign, which happens to be the time that our book picks up here, the third year of his reign, he decided he was going to go up there and do some business with the Greeks. He wanted to go up there and defeat them since they had humiliated his father.

So he began and it took him four years to assemble everything and get everybody on the bandwagon and go back up there and fight this big battle. And the upshot of it is that this chapter, Esther chapter one, tells us about the early work of Xerxes in gathering all of the people in his land and garnering their support and their resources to go up to reassemble their army and to have the entire empire united in contributing troops and resources to go up and defeat the Greeks. We know all of this from Herodotus and so on.

That is the background. That's the reason that he is assembling all of these provincial leaders. So in the days of Ahasuerus, he has 127 provinces.

The ancient historians say that there were about 30 or 31 what they call satrapies that made up this empire. And people used to say, well, see this book isn't even right because we know from history that there were only 30 something big provinces. But those are large, this is kind of like the difference between a state and a county.

And basically each of these satrapies had four or five sub-sections. And so Xerxes isn't satisfied to just bring the 30 provincial governments up and impress them. He gets the sub-division governors to come as well.

Well, there's so many of them, and he got 127 of these provinces that he can't bring them all in there at once. So he rotates them through. He brings a big palace full one week and entertains them with a big feast and then he runs them off and gets the next batch.

And this whole process takes about six months to get all of the governors and all of the staff and cabinet members and all this for these different provinces all the way from India, which is now what we would call Pakistan, all the way to Ethiopia or Cush is what it says in Hebrew, which is the northern part of Africa. So this entire big region is represented and these leaders come up and he winds them and dines them and then tells them about his big plan to go up and fight the Greeks and is garnering their support and getting promises of allegiance and so on. That's what's going on here.

He's not just partying for the fun of it for six months. There's method in his madness here. So that's what's going on in those days when King Ahasuerus or Xerxes sat on the throne of his kingdom, which was in Shushan.

This is Susa, the citadel. Now they have excavated this palace. They have actually found it.

And let me read you a description. From the archaeologists who found it. The ancient palace of Susa has been recently disinterred from an incumbent mass of earth and ruins.

And in that palace, which is beyond all doubt, the actual edifice referred to in this passage, there is a great hall of marble pillars. Quote, the position of the great colonnade corresponds with the account here given. It stands on an elevation in the center of the mound, the remainder of which we may well imagine to have been occupied after the Persian fashion with a garden and fountains.

Part of it, you know, is kind of tumbled away. The colonnade would represent the court of the garden of the king's palace with its pillars of marble. I am even inclined to believe the expression Shushan the palace applies especially to this portion of the existing ruins.

This is a man named Loftus who wrote a book called Chaldaea and Susiana. So they have found this marble pavement and the marble columns that are described right here in a ruined state.

So this situation described by Herodotus, the ancient historian, is all in preparation for this invasion that Xerxes is going to launch in 481 BC.

So his reign began in 485 and this is the third year and so very soon after this he is going to begin launching this invasion. So this is the third out of the four years. I think I said seven a minute ago but it took him four years to get ready to launch the invasion.

From the time he took the throne until he launched it was four years. This is the third year. So he is getting all these people together so the following year he can go up there.

And that is what this 180 day exhibition of wealth and splendor is all about. By the way, the book of Esther doesn't say anything about the eventual invasion but we know from history that Xerxes sent an immense fleet up there and this is the famous ancient battle of Thermopylae. I learned about it at the Naval Academy.

I think everybody has to learn about the great naval battles there. And then he went on and fought them again at Salamis and at Salamis he got defeated because the Greeks were on the ascendancy and the Persians were on the downward spiral there. That is the vision that Daniel interpreted for Nebuchadnezzar.

And so, they got so far but the Greeks are kind of the up and comers and the Persians and the Medes are the down and dying ones. And so he gets stopped at Salamis in 480 and the battle of Plataea, remember the Plataeans that came and helped the Athenians? Well, in the same way that the Plataeans defeated his father they end up defeating Xerxes in 479 BC which is the seventh year of his reign. That is where I had the seven in my mind.

That was after his defeat by Greece. So, all of this harmonizes very well. So, it goes on to tell us after this big 180 day, 6 month feast, now stay with me because we are about to get to the interesting part.

If that wasn't interesting enough for you, this is going to be even more interesting. After bringing all of the provincial leaders in and winding them down and getting them on board let's all go fight the Greeks next year. Then, he makes another feast.

Verse 5, He showed all these other people the riches of his glorious kingdom and the splendor of his excellent majesty for many days, 180 days in all. And when these days were completed, the king made a feast lasting seven days for all the people who were present in Shushan or Susa, the citadel from great to small in the court of the garden of the king's palace. Too big of a crowd to fit inside any of the banquet halls in the palace so they're out in the garden.

And they make these sort of tent coverings to keep the sun off of them. There's white and blue linen curtains with cords of fine linen, purple silver rods, marble pillars, couches of gold and silver. Obviously, these are going to be plush couches covered with cloths of woven gold and silver and that kind of thing.

This is opulence. The king is saying, look, we have got the resources. We are the dominant civilization here.

We're going to go put down these Greek savages up north. They've got the alabaster, turquoise, white and black marble, drinks and golden vessels, all different kinds, royal wine in abundance and so on. In accordance with the law, the drinking was not compulsory.

Now, what does this mean? Well, everybody is invited. The king was, there was unlimited amount of wine. There was nobody that didn't get as much wine as he wanted is the basic idea.

If you want a little bit, there's a little bit. If you want a lot, there's an endless supply. Meanwhile, Queen Vashti also made a feast for the women in the royal palace which belonged to King Xerxes or King Ahasuerus.

Now, Vashti is a Persian word that means beautiful lady. It's not necessarily her actual name. We know from Herodotus that Xerxes queen's name was Amestris, Amestris, A-M-E-S-T-R-I-S, Amestris.

Now, whether that name refers to Vashti, the first queen, or Esther, the second queen, nobody knows. We know that Esther's Hebrew name was Hadassah, doesn't really match Amestris. I would suspect that this is Vashti's real name because Vashti is kind of a generic name.

It's kind of like calling her the beautiful one or beautiful lady. We call the wife of the president the first lady. And I think Vashti was the Persian equivalent of first lady.

And it just means the glorious one, the beautiful one. But her actual name apparently was Amestris according to Herodotus. So she also makes this feast for the women in the royal palace.

Why? Well, there is a long-standing custom in the ancient world that the men would party in one place and the women in another. This came down all the way to modern times where you'll see in, for example, movies or things made about the late 1800s or early 1900s where they have a get-together and everybody sits at the table. Then the women retire and they go off one place and the men sit around and smoke cigars and talk politics and they don't want the women in the room.

Well, that separation of men and women is a very ancient custom going all the way back to before the time of Christ and they actually feasted in a separate area. And that's what's going on here. So that sets the background because, of course, the king is going to talk politics now.

He's going to talk military strategy. Now, after a week of this, and this is the capital and these are the main... This is the king's cabinet and his generals and all of his close associates. So on the seventh day, he's got the stuff all ironed out.

Everybody's in agreement. Everybody's all ready to go. The heart of the king is merry with wine.

He commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus. Now, what do we know about eunuchs in ancient government from studying the book of Daniel? Well, they are... These are high-ranking, trusted advisors to the king. They're eunuchs because they don't want there to be any chance of somebody subverting them with a Mata Hari type of operation, seducing them and weaning secrets out of them or whatever.

So, they would ensure that these men who are closest to the king are eunuchs and therefore, they're just dedicated to the king. They don't have any side interests. Very common practice in the pagan governments of the ancient world.

Now, there are... How many? You got Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Carcas, seven eunuchs. This is the cabinet and these words are all Persian words and they seem to be titles rather than personal names. When they do the etymology of these words, they find that these... This is sort of like the Knight of the Bath and the Knight of the Garter and that sort of thing.

I won't go into the meanings of these names because it's very doubtful. We don't know a whole lot about the ancient Persian language. But, he commands the eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing her royal crown in order to show her beauty to the people and the officials for she was beautiful to behold.

Now, the rabbis, the ancient Jewish rabbis add a word here when they... the targums which are the commentaries, they say, and this is a very old tradition, that she was supposed to wear her royal crown and nothing else. And they add the word naked in here to give a reason for her refusal to come into the palace and be ogled at by the officials. It's not in the original text and it doesn't really need to be.

That sounds like kind of a later way to explain why the queen refused to obey this command and parade herself before the men and the officials. Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command brought by his eunuchs. Therefore, the king was furious and his anger burned within him.

There are a lot of applications that are made by going to this that, you know, Esther becomes queen because she finds favor in the king's side and Vashti apparently was real independent-minded and sort of flaunted the authority of the king or violated the command and so on. I don't think you can really make a case for that based on what's in the Scripture here. One thing you can say is after the end of a week of feasting and drinking as much as anyone wanted, the king's judgment is not likely to have been very good.

And the fact that he flew into a rage at this refusal without any explanation or without any further inquiry indicates that it is likely that the fault here was his and not hers. It may be that the Jewish rabbinical tradition is correct and that he wanted her to come in in a state of undress or something, but that's not what the Scripture says. It does say that she was to come in to

display her beauty to the people and the officials.

And she refused. Now, as a result of this, she is going to be eliminated as queen. And this is going to pave the way for a new queen.

One thing we do know is that Esther is a believer in God. Xerxes is not. Vashti, as far as we know, is not.

And if you're not a believer, your fate and your circumstances are just the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. There is no divine protection. All we can do is for whom God thinks we love God.

Esther is such a person. Mordecai is such a person. And this book is going to tell us a provision.

We're out of time for tonight, so we'll pick up on the 7th day in verse 10 next time. Father, thank You for the privilege of studying Your Word. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will enlighten us.

May Your Word be a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path in the days ahead. We ask it in Jesus' name.