

Esther 06-02-28A

This is the 28th of February 2006. We're in the book of Esther chapter 1. Let's take a moment as we begin our study to exercise our individual priesthood. We tend to forget from day to day.

I suspect that we are in fact priests and as such we have an obligation to represent ourselves before God to ensure that we are purified from the sin that so easily besets us. It is no different than someone in the ancient world walking around in their sandals and accumulating dirt on their feet. They had the custom of washing feet whenever they came into a dwelling and when we come into the place where we partake of food for our souls, it is important that we cleanse ourselves, that we be in a position where God the Holy Spirit can teach us.

So let's take a moment here to go to the Lord in prayer. Father, we know that our life is not lived in our own strength or by our own power, but in the power of your spirit and with the guidance and the sure knowledge of the truth of your word. We thank you for the opportunity to study it together tonight.

We pray that you will bless us with concentration, with perception, with insight, so that from this passage each of us can derive that encouragement and motivation to live our lives in the days ahead in a way that is pleasing in your sight. We ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

As I said, we're in the book of Esther chapter 1. You remember that in our introductory pair of lessons, we looked at the background from a Persian point of view. What is going on in this time of approximately 483 BC in this dominating Empire. And we saw that Darius had been defeated by the Greeks and his son Ahasuerus or Xerxes wants to go back and poke them in the eye a good one.

And he's going to do that in about 481. But in preparation for that, he is gathering all the people from his provinces, whining and dining them, getting them to jump on the bandwagon and commit their troops and their financial support to this endeavor. Then last time we looked at the Jewish background, we reminded ourselves of the unfaithfulness and disobedience in Judah, the southern kingdom, which resulted in the discipline by God carrying away into Babylon under Nebuchadnezzar.

They were there for a full 70 years of discipline. Jerusalem fell in 586 BC and the release of captives and return to the land doesn't begin until down in the teens. 516 for convenience sake, we'll just say 516, 70 years after the fall of Jerusalem, is when you have a lot of things going on in terms of rededicating the temple.

You have Ezra and Nehemiah and so forth. Now think about it, 516 and the book of Esther picks up in roughly 483 BC. So how many years is that? 83 plus 17 gets you to 500, another 16.

So this is maybe 30 years, give or take, after the end of the captivity and a lot of people have returned back to the land. But of course a lot of people haven't and we talked about that last

time, that some of these people are the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those who were carried away captive or killed by the Babylonians. We're going to find that out when we get to the the family tree, if you will, of Mordecai.

But that's the setting. So has everybody kind of got a mental picture now? We're in Shushan, we're in Susa, the capital of Persia. It's east of Babylon and there's a lot of Jewish people who have sort of integrated in.

What do you think would happen? Well, better than that, what did happen in 1865 to 1870 and 1875 after the Civil War, after Abraham Lincoln, we just celebrated President's Day this past week. Abraham Lincoln, what's he most famous for? Emancipation proclamation along with some other things. So all the slaves were emancipated.

So now how many shiploads of black people did you see heading back across the Atlantic to take them all back to Africa? They were free and they all got hauled away from Africa to come over to America, right? So now there were a few, you know, you have a country over there called Liberia or used to, right? But most of the people who were hauled over here under horrible circumstances and maybe suffered, some suffered more than others, some didn't suffer at all. We're glad to be here. But once they were emancipated, the great vast swarming majority stayed here, didn't they? And you can imagine the same thing happening in Persia with the release of captivity and the freedom to return.

Many people said, well, I don't really know anything about that little tiny postage stamp called Judea and Jerusalem. Last I heard, it was all torn up and beaten down and nobody knows who owns anything back there. And we've got ties here.

We have familiarity here. We're accustomed to it and we're just going to stay. So that's the situation.

We've seen the six months of feasting that Ahasuerus has done here. And what do we conclude about Ahasuerus? What kind of a man is he? Is he an admirable man? Is he a leader that commands respect and draws quality people to himself by his great character and so on? He's bribing everyone, isn't he? I'll wine you, I'll dine you, let me impress you with my stuff. I got gold and silver tablecloths and drink as much as you want, stay as long as you want and so on.

This is the kind of thing that people do when they operate at a shallow level. You will run into people, if you haven't already, who will try to attract you as a friend with superficial means for superficial reasons. Those of you who are not yet at dating age, take heed.

I say again, take heed. Watch out for Greeks bearing gifts. Watch out for those who are giving you hollow gifts and inside is something bad.

This is Xerxes. This is Ahasuerus. He is not a good guy.

I am going to depart from the biblical text here and give you some history. Those of you in

school say, wait a minute, I just got out of class. I don't want to do any history.

You'll want to hear this history. This is some fascinating stuff. This is the Greek historian Herodotus.

Herodotus. I'm just going to give you an excerpt. This is from Book 9. We've got vast wheelbarrow loads of Herodotus.

So if you ever want to find this again, you need to make a note. This is Book 9 and this is Section 106 and following. Okay, Book 9, Section 106.

Now, I told you about this big defeat that had been suffered by the Persians and so Ahasuerus is getting everybody together and he's going to go up there and try to fight them again. Well, when this happens, when he goes up and has this battle, I told you what happened, right? Who won? The Greeks won. What did they do? They burnt the ships.

They routed the troops. They sent them all back in disgrace. Well, Herodotus tells us in this battle the Greeks who behaved with the greatest bravery were the Athenians and among them the palm was borne off by Hermolichus, the son of Euthynius, a man accomplished in the pancreatium.

He was blah, blah, blah, blah, this, that, and the other. The Greeks, when they had slaughtered the greater portion of the barbarians, now remember, this is Herodotus writing, so the Persians are the barbarians, right? When they had slaughtered the greater portion of the barbarians, either in the battle or in the route, set fire to their ships and burnt them together with the bulwark which had been raised for their defense. First, however, removing therefrom all the booty and carrying it down to the beach.

They got plunder and caskets of money. They burnt the rampart and the vessels. They sailed away to Samos and took counsel together and they had a bunch of doings with the Ionians.

Remember, the Ionians, that was a big part of the problem to begin with, is that the Persians were going to try to go up there and capture Ionia and the other Greeks had to go fight there so they wouldn't have to fight on their home turf. Well, now, here's the good part. The barbarians, this is section 107 of book 9, Herodotus.

This was written over 2,000 years ago. You're reading what a guy sat and wrote down. Can you imagine if you sat and wrote down the history of things that you know from the present day? And can you imagine somebody in the year 4006 picking up what you wrote and reading it to a group of people? To me, it's amazing that we can reach that far back in time and get the very words that someone wrote.

Here's what Herodotus says about the fleeing Persians. The barbarians who escaped from the battle, a scanty remnant, took refuge in the heights of Mycale. That's M-Y-C-A-L-E.

Whence they made good their retreat to Sardis. Now, Sardis is a name that we know. We know where Sardis is.

Does anybody ring a bell on Sardis? What's Sardis famous for? Anybody? Did they get a letter from Jesus much later? Yes. Now, so they're making their retreat to Sardis. Sardis is where Ahasuerus is.

Now, Ahasuerus, he didn't go out in front of the troops. He didn't go out and lead them like Napoleon or like Hannibal or like any self-respecting king who would get out there in the front, wave his sword and throw his spear and holler at the troops and say, let's go, let's go. He's sitting back in the rear with the gear at Sardis.

So, he sent the generals out to fight and they got whooped and the scattered remnants are coming back to get to the king and say, oh, king, guess what? We goofed. We lost. So, they're going back to Sardis.

During the march, Macistes, M-A-S-I-S-T-E-S, Macistes. Now, this is an important guy. Macistes is Ahasuerus' brother.

He sent his brother up there to do the fighting. That's what I'd do. I'd send my brother out there, stay back in the rear because he's bigger than I am.

He'd have a better chance of success. During the march, Macistes, the son of Darius, who had been present at the disaster, had words with Artaintes. Artaintes, A-R-T-A-Y-N-T-E-S.

Artaintes, the general, on whom he showered many reproaches. He's the brother of the king and he says, look, General Artaintes, you messed this up. You're the reason we lost.

You're a crummy general. Bad tactics, bad strategy, bad implementation, bad logistics, bad leadership, bad, bad, bad. You're a bad general.

Boo on you. You made us lose. That's what he's saying.

He's just showering him with reproaches. Listen to this. Now, pay attention.

This is important to our study in the book of Esther. This is Macistes talking to Artaintes. He called him, among other things, worse than a woman.

Worse than a woman for the way in which he had exercised his command and said there was no punishment which he did not deserve to suffer for doing the king's house such a grievous hurt. Now, with the Persians, there is no greater insult than to call a man worse than a woman. No greater insult.

Now, think about this. There's no insult, Herodotus says, in the Persian world, worse. And here's the general of the armies.

He says, you're a weak sister. You're a lily-livered panty-waist. You're worse than a woman.

So, when Artaintes had borne the reproaches for some while, at last, he fell in a rage. He was fed up. He was tired of being called a woman and worse than a woman.

He fell into a rage and drew his scimitar upon Macistes, feigning to kill him. He said, that's enough. Call me a woman one more time.

Off with your head, you woman. So, then he draws his scimitar and he's going to try to hack him to pieces. But, a certain Halicarnassian, Xenogoros by name, the son of Praxileus, who stood behind Artaintes at the time, seeing him in the act of rushing forward, seized him suddenly round the waist and lifted it from his feet, dashed him down upon the ground, and this gave time for the spearmen who guarded Macistes to come to his aid.

By his conduct here, Xenogoros gained the favor, not only of Macistes, but likewise of Xerxes himself, whose brother he had preserved from death. You saved the life of my brother, bully for you. And because of that, Xerxes rewarded his action by setting him over the whole land of Cilicia.

You can look on the map of New Testament times and see where Cilicia is. Paul the Apostle goes up there and addresses people in that region. Well, Xenogoros, the guy who did a good deed for the king, those of you who know the story of the book of Esther here ought to be seeing some similarities.

Here's a man who did something the king is happy about, saved the life of his brother, and he grants him great favor, gives him this big piece of territory to rule over, set him over the whole land of Cilicia. Except for this, nothing else happened on the road. The men continued their march and all came safe to Sardis.

At Sardis they found the king who had been there ever since he lost the sea fight and fled from Athens to Asia. So, the lowly-livered, panty-waist king, at least his general was out there fighting, and they're saying he's worse than a woman. Well, the king got discouraged and left and went back to Sardis.

Now, during the time that Xerxes abode at this place, he fell in love with the wife of Maciste. What do we call the wife of your brother? It's your sister-in-law, right? This is his brother's wife. He fell in love with his brother's wife, who was likewise staying in the city.

He therefore sent her messages, but failed to win her consent, and he could not dare to use violence out of regard to Maciste's brother. This the woman knew well enough, and hence it was that she had the boldness to resist him. So, Xerxes, finding no other way open, devised a marriage between his own son Darius, remember his father's name was Darius and he's got a son named Darius, and a daughter of this woman named Maciste.

Now, what do we call people who are the children of brothers? They're cousins, they're first

cousins, right? So, Maciste has a daughter, Xerxes has a son, and so Xerxes declares these two engaged. And he's hoping that he might better obtain his ends if he affects this union. They're going to draw the families together.

They're going to be spending a lot more time together because now they're in-laws as well as in-laws, right? I was just going back through the lyrics to that song by Ray Stephens, I Am My Own Grandpa. You know, because the guy says, I married this girl and then my father married her daughter, and then all of the shenanigans that ensue. Well, now if this marriage takes place, they're not only brother-in-law, sister-in-law, but they're also uncles or fathers-in-law, and it gets real complicated.

But that's what he wanted to do because he wanted to get next to this woman who is the wife of his brother. Accordingly, he betrothed these two persons to one another. After the usual ceremonies were completed, he took his departure for Susa, Shushan, going back to where our story is set.

When he was calm there and had received the woman into his palace as his son's bride, a change came over him. And losing all love for the wife of Maciste, he conceived a passion for his son's bride, Maciste's daughter. And Artenta, sounds very much like the general's name, right? The general's name was Artentes, her name is Artenta.

Artenta very soon returned his love. So now, instead of being in love with his sister-in-law, he's in love with his future daughter-in-law, the girl that he has engaged to his son. This is our guy.

This is our man Ahasuerus in Esther chapter 1. Are you tracking here? Are you following what's going on? So she very soon returned his love. After a while, the thing was discovered, in the way Herodotus says, which I will now relate. The wife of Xerxes, her name is Amestris.

This, we think, is Vashti. There is a torturous way that you can look at the linguistics and get from Amestris to Vashti via Aramaic. Amestris, the wife of Xerxes, had woven with her own hands a long robe of many colors and very curious, which she presented to her husband as a gift.

Xerxes, who was greatly pleased with it, forthwith put it on and went in to visit Artenta, who happened likewise on this day to please him greatly. He therefore told her to ask him whatever boon she liked. What boon do you crave? he said to Artenta.

And he promised that whatever she asked, he would assuredly grant to her. Now, what do you think she is going to ask for? Artenta said to him, Will you indeed give me whatever I like to ask? The king, suspecting nothing, pledged his word and swore to her. She then, as soon as she heard this oath, asked boldly for the robe.

Hereupon, Xerxes tried all possible means to avoid the gift, not that he grudged to give it, but because he dreaded Amestris, who already suspected and would now, he feared, detect his love. Because here she's labored with her own two royal queenly hands and made this robe,

which he, the same day, goes and gives to his girlfriend, his future daughter-in-law, who is her daughter. Or, let's see, no, it would be her niece.

Yeah, it's her niece. So, he offered her cities instead, and heaps of gold, and an army which would obey no other leader but her. And Herodotus says the last of these is a thoroughly Persian gift.

I'll give you an army, and they'll do whatever you want. But as nothing could prevail on Artenta to change her mind, at last he gave her the robe. Then Artenta was very greatly rejoiced, and she often wore the garment and was proud of it.

And so it came to the ears of Amestris that the robe had been given to her. Now, when Amestris learnt the whole matter, she felt no anger against Artenta, but, looking upon her mother, now we're back to the sister-in-law that Xerxes originally fell in love with, well, his wife is mad at that woman, who's the mother of the daughter who has the robe. Looking upon her mother, the wife of Messistes, as the cause of all the mischief, she determined to bring about her death.

She waited, therefore, till her husband gave a great royal banquet, a feast which takes place once every year in celebration of the king's birthday. Tikta, the feast is called in the Persian tongue, which in our language may be rendered perfect. And this is the only day in all the year on which the king soaps his head.

I'm just reading you what Herodotus... You think I'm just trying to see if you're paying attention or not? That's what Herodotus really said. It's his birthday feast. On his birthday, it's the only day in all the year on which the king soaps his head and distributes gifts to the Persians.

It's kind of a forerunner to Christmas. I celebrate my own birthday, I scrub my head and give everybody presents. Now, Amestris waited accordingly for this day and then made request of Xerxes that he would please to give her as her present the wife of Messistes.

He refused. It seemed to him shocking and monstrous to give into the power of another, a woman who was not only his brother's wife, but was likewise wholly guiltless of what had happened, the more especially because he knew well enough with what intent Amestris had preferred her request. He knows Amestris is a very violently disposed woman.

And this is his brother's wife who is the target and he can see bad news rearing its ugly head here. At length, however, wearied by her importunity and constrained by the law of the feast, which required that no one who asked a boon that day at the king's board should be denied his request. They have a lot of weird customs in Persia that just get them in trouble, don't they? Anything you ask on that day, you have to grant it.

He yielded but with a very ill will and gave the woman into her power. Having done so and told Amestris she might deal with her as she chose, the king called his brother into his presence and said, look, Messistes, you're my brother, the son of my father Darius, you're a good man. Look, I'm asking you, don't live with this woman anymore that's your wife.

Get rid of her and I'll give you one of my other daughters. I've got a daughter here along with my son Darius. Why don't you marry your niece and get rid of your wife? He's trying to head it off, you know, so that if something happens to his brother's wife, the brother has already kind of thrown her over and it won't be any big deal.

Well, he says, I'll give you instead my own daughter in marriage. Take her to live with you but part first with the wife you now have. I don't like it that you're keeping her.

To this, Messistes, greatly astonished, answered my lord and master, how strange a speech you have uttered. You bid me put away my wife. Remember, Xerxes, Hasuerus is the older brother.

This is his younger brother, Messistes, right? You're telling me to put away my wife who has borne me three goodly youths and daughters besides. Notice, three goodly youths, those are the boys, and daughters besides. These people are, you know, worse than a woman.

It's a low view. And you've taken one of my daughters and espoused her to your own son. Now you're wanting me to put away my wife even though she pleases me greatly and you want me to marry a daughter of yours.

In truth, O king, I'm flattered that I'm accounted worthy to wed your daughter and it's an honor which is, you know, mightily esteemed. But to do as you say, I am in no wise willing. I pray thee, use not force to compel me to yield to your request.

Be sure your daughter will find a husband just as worthy as me. You know, he thinks, well, he's trying to marry off the daughter. Suffer me then to live on with my own wife.

That's how Messistes answered. Xerxes in wrath says, I will tell thee, Messistes, what you have gained by these words. I will not give you my daughter nor will you live any longer with your own wife.

So you may learn in time to come to take what is offered to you. Messistes, when he heard this, withdrew, saying only, Master, you have not yet taken my life. While these things were passing between Xerxes and his brother, Messistes, Amestris, and here's the part, don't fall asleep now, while the two brothers are talking back and forth, Amestris, the wife, sent for the spearmen of the royal bodyguard and caused the wife of Messistes to be mutilated in a horrible fashion.

Her two breasts, her nose, ears, and lips were cut off and thrown to the dogs. Her tongue was torn out by the roots and thus disfigured, she was sent back to her home. This is the household that we are studying about here in Esther chapter 1. Messistes, who knew nothing of what had happened, was fearful that some calamity had befallen him, ran hastily to his house.

There he found his wife savagely used, took counsel with his sons. Accompanied by them and others, he set forth on his way to Bactria, one of the provinces which belonged to him. It's one of his being the brother to the king.

He had a lot of loyal people over there in Bactria and he was going to stir up revolt and do great hurt to Xerxes. But Xerxes found out about it, sent troops, and slew his brother and all of his brother's sons on the road. So basically, everybody's wiped out now in the Messistes' front.

The wife, of course, died and so did Messistes. So Xerxes sent his armed force, slew him while he was still upon the road with his sons and his whole army. Such is the tale of King Xerxes' love and the death of his brother, Messistes.

Well, this is the guy. This is who we're looking at here. Now, you can imagine what Xerxes, what Ahasuerus thinks of Amestris slash Vashti by the time all of this is over with.

Now, is it the same woman that we have here? It would seem not because this took place after the battle that is yet future. However, we're going to see that the timing is extended here. The queen isn't immediately gone and the new queen isn't immediately brought into place for a while.

But you get an idea of the attitudes and you get an idea of the carelessness of human life and the fickleness, the varying mind of Xerxes. What kind of a man is this? Who falls in love with his sister-in-law then falls in love with his niece and kills his own brother, etc. He's not an admirable man.

You think about that and think about what Esther is called to when she's called to be queen to this man. Well, on that note, we're going to pause and take our break. When we come back, we will resume our account in Esther 1 and see what takes place.