

Esther 06-03-07A

This is the 7th of March, 2006. We continue tonight our study in the book of Esther. We're in chapter 1, and we'll take a moment, as we always do, to make sure that we are in a position to receive the benefit of the Holy Spirit, which God has given to each one of us.

So, without further ado, let's pause for a moment and go to the Lord in prayer. Father, we are grateful for another opportunity to spend time together in fellowship and in the study of your Word. We pray that God the Holy Spirit will find us teachable, that we will remember the things that we see in your Word that are applicable to us, and that we can live in the light of them, we can live in a way that is pleasing in your sight.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. We should by now have a pretty good idea of the situation.

We are in the decade of the 470s B.C., 479 to 470 B.C., almost 500 years before Christ will be at the cross. We are after the ten northern tribes of Israel have been taken away by the Assyrians in 721 B.C. This is after the Babylonian captivity that began in 603 B.C. and concluded the initial phase in 586 with the destruction of the temple. So, 586 to 486, this is about a hundred years after the destruction of the temple and the final scattering and carrying away into Babylon.

What was going on a hundred years ago in this country? This is 2006, so what was going on in 1906? Theodore Roosevelt was president. Oklahoma was just in the process of becoming a state. I think 1907 was the year that Oklahoma became a state, if I remember right.

My grandmother was born in 1904 in Indian Territory, Pawnee Indian Territory, which three years later would become the state of Oklahoma. But things have changed a lot, haven't they? Think about the kinds of transportation. It was still basically horse and buggy days.

Electricity was just starting to become widespread in its use. A lot of people still lived by gas lights. My grandmother's house still had the gas pipes in it, and there was still gas in the pipes when they went up there to start doing renovations back even in the 1960s.

But it's been a lot of change in a hundred years. None of us here can remember anything from 1906, and very few of us can remember anything from 1956, 50 years later. Fifty years is a pretty long time ago for most of us.

And yet this is 100 years after the destruction of Jerusalem. The Babylonian Empire has been conquered and superseded by the Medo-Persian Empire. You no longer have Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar from the days of Daniel.

Now you have Darius I, and after Darius you have Xerxes. And Xerxes is the king here in Esther chapter 1. Now I told you about the fact that Darius had suffered the first big defeat of his army at the hands of the Greeks, and one of his only defeats. In about 490 or so, Darius had been defeated.

So six years later, Darius I dies. This is about 484 BC. Darius dies, and Xerxes comes to the throne.

Now this is important. You might want to write the dates down just so you can find the bracket where these events are taking place. So 484, that's the first year of Xerxes' reign, and he's a fairly young man as kings go.

But he's really embarrassed and shamed by this defeat of his father's army at the hands of the Greeks, and he wants to go avenge it. So very shortly after he comes to the throne, he starts laying plans to go back and whip the Greeks. And he spends three years preparing his army for this.

And shortly before he leaves, he has this series of feasts that we saw in Esther chapter 1, where he invites all the people from the 127 provinces over the course of six months. Different provinces every week. Brings them in, winds them and dines them, says, come on, jump on board, finance, send troops, help me go whip the Greeks and take this stain off of our national reputation.

So right around 480 to 479, now this would be about in the fourth or fifth year of Xerxes' reign. He's been the king for four, four and a half, five years. He goes and fights the Greeks.

And he has a big success on the ground. He whips the Greeks, drives them back. They have to flee Athens.

Athens is an open city. And he goes in and sacks Athens. And all the inhabitants of Athens flee off the coast of Greece to an island called Salamis.

Now, one of the most famous naval battles in history takes place at Salamis because the Persians pretty much just mop all the area of Athens and around Athens. Everything is great. However, Xerxes lost his fleet before they could get there to help him.

And so he's down some ships. And when he finally gets some to come with him, he wants to go and get the last of the Athenians on Salamis. And what he ought to do is just blockade them, starve them out.

But he's impatient. He's already been over there a year. And he's kind of getting sick of the whole thing.

He says, let's just go in and take them. And so he makes this foolish attack. And the Greeks whip him at the Battle of Salamis and send him back home.

And he doesn't ever get them. But this is all in the roughly fifth year of his reign. Is everybody with me? Right around 480 B.C. Why is this important? Because this first paragraph, verses 1 through pretty much the whole first chapter, all of this feasting, all of the thing with Vashti, this takes place in that six months before he goes.

So he's gone for like the fifth and sixth year of his reign fighting this battle. And Vashti is on the skids. She's on the outs.

But she's not been divorced. And she has not been executed. She's just sort of banished because she won't come before the king.

We studied that last time. So now the king comes back. And this is where we are in chapter 2. Chapter 2. After these things, when the wrath of the king subsided, he remembered Vashti what she had done and what had been decreed against her.

Why would this have slipped his mind? Well, he's been off fighting battles. He's been off in Lystra and other places like that. Getting tangled up with his sister-in-law and his niece.

Right? So, whatever credibility Vashti had vanished when he got back from the battle. And she did all of this plotting and scheming and mutilating of her sister-in-law because of the romance with the niece. We talked about that last time, right? So there's a lot of bad blood now between Xerxes and Vashti.

But she is a very powerful woman. And a very vindictive woman. And a dangerous woman.

And so he remembered what she had done, what had been decreed. So his servants say, Let these beautiful young virgins be sought for the king. This is chapter 2 now, verse 2. Let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather all the beautiful young virgins to Shushan the citadel into the women's quarters.

Under the custody of Haggai, the king's eunuch, custodian of the women. He runs the harem. Let beauty preparations be given to them.

Then let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti. The thing pleased the king and he did so. In Shushan the citadel there was a certain Jew whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite.

Kish had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives who had been captured with Jeconiah, king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, had carried away. Now, I don't know if you remember this or not, but there were three big carryings away to Babylon. The first one was in 603, and that's the one that Daniel and his three friends went in.

The second one in 590-something was when Ezekiel was taken. And the third one was when the city was sacked and the temple destroyed in 586. Now, what do you remember about those carryings away? What was special about the first one in 603 BC? What kind of families did Daniel and his three friends come from? They were the nobility, weren't they? They were the princes.

The first carrying away, when Nebuchadnezzar first carried guys away from Jerusalem to Babylon, he took the cream of the crop. He took the leaders and said, what I'm going to do is raise a new generation of leaders that I have trained, that I have brought around to my way of

thinking, and they will bring the rest of the people along. That was his original plan, which was pretty smart.

So, which of those carryings away was Kish, the great-grandfather of Mordecai, in? The one with Jeconiah, which is the first one. So, what does that tell us about Kish? Is he a low-life donkey driver? Why do I say donkey driver? What was Saul doing when we first saw him and Samuel? He was out there looking for his father's donkeys, right? And the prophet meets him and anoints him. Well, this Kish is no donkey farmer.

He's nobility. He's aristocracy. He's from one of the noble families, i.e., the former royal family in Judah.

So, Kish comes away in that first carrying away, and this tells us something about Mordecai. Mordecai has a princely heritage, and of course, so does Esther. She's from the nobility as well.

They're from the same grandfather, right? They've got the same grandpa and grandmother. So, that's what we know about the family here. That's why we have this information given to us.

This Kish was carried away with the captives, captured with Jeconiah, king of Judah. That tells us about this family of Mordecai and Esther. They are, or they were, nobility in Judah.

Mordecai brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman was lovely and beautiful. When her father and mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter.

So, he's a little older than she is. Doesn't have to be much. If he's in his twenties and she's in her teens, that's all it would take.

Now, her name is Hadassah. I toyed with the idea that for the rest of the study, we would call her by the translation of her name, and this would be Myrtle, M-Y-R-T-L-E. That's what Hadassah translates to.

So, this is a story of Myrtle, the queen. But it doesn't have the same ring as Esther, and that's not what the Bible calls her. It only mentions that her Hebrew name is Hadassah.

But the myrtle tree is a very beautiful tree. It's suggestive of beauty and grace, and evidently when she was young and her parents were alive, that's what they called her. But she is known to history by her Persian name, which is Esther.

Esther, and this seems to be related to, I think the Spanish term through the Latin for stars is Estrella, E-S-T-R-E-L-L-A, something like that. And Esther is related to that word group family, and it means star, heavenly body, I suppose you could say. So, this is Esther, and she is Mordecai's her guardian.

So it was when the king's command and the decree were heard, and when many young women were gathered at Shushan the citadel, under the custody of Haggai, Esther also was taken to

the king's palace. Now, think about this. There's already a lot of beautiful Persian women, young women, unmarried women, that have been brought to the palace.

She is not in the first group. There's a bunch of them already there. And Haggai is looking them over.

And Haggai knows Xerxes, knows his tastes and his predilections and what he likes and what he doesn't like. And he's just looking over the crop of these girls, thinking, well, I wonder which one of these is going to keep me from getting my head chopped off when I send her into the king. I don't want to be sending in something that he's going to get upset and come after me and get a different chamberlain for the women, a different eunuch to run the outfit.

So he's worried about this. So when Esther comes, he is immediately struck with her unusual beauty. God gifted her with extraordinary physical beauty.

And she has inner beauty as well as outer beauty. She impresses everyone that she comes in contact with. Now, there are people like this.

There are people that just have a natural, personal charisma. And it can be a blessing and a curse. Because if you have a very charismatic personality, then you never know if people are just drawn like a moth to the flame or if they really appreciate you for who you might be.

But she is given this beauty for a purpose and for a reason. And so once Haggai sees her, the young woman pleased him. And it says she obtained his favor.

Now, there are two ways you can say obtained favor in Hebrew. One is an active verb and the other is a passive verb. We usually see the translation of the passive.

It says, and she found favor in his eyes. But this Hebrew phrase here, where it says she obtained his favor, it's a really good English translation because it says she obtained. And you have that active voice.

Obtained is an active verb, isn't it? It's not like she received his favor. And this has the idea that she earned this. She earned his respect.

She earned his favor. She took an active role in being obedient and following instructions and obeying the rules and all of this. You get the idea a lot of these women maybe were kind of harem-scarem.

Well, I guess that's an unintentional pun there. But they didn't find the same kind of favor in his eyes that Esther does. And she actively won his favor.

It's what she did that caused this favor to fall on her. And so he readily gave beauty preparations to her. Archaeologists have found these incense burners in different places in the Middle East.

And they were trying to figure out how they worked. And then they looked at some Ethiopians from just about a hundred years ago. They had the very same kind of incense burners.

And so they said, hey, Ethiopian people, how do you use those? They said, well, we do it like this. We take this thing and light it up in the room and it fills the room with this perfume and the women stay in that room and it imbues their clothing and it imbues their skin. And it's kind of like the reverse of being sprayed by a skunk.

You know, that skunk stuff is really hard to get off. You have to soak in a bathtub of tomato juice or something to get rid of it because it's very tenacious. It hangs on and doesn't leave.

Well, by spending a lot of time in these perfumed rooms off these incense burners, their hair, all of them, they had the whole rack of clothing in there and it all would smell real good. And that's what he did for her. He gave her these beauty preparations.

These would have been creams and whatever they did for cosmetics in the ancient world, whatever they had for Avon and Clairol and all the other stuff they have, Maybelline. They've been doing this stuff for thousands of years, giving women these beauty preparations. But Hagar gives her the special stuff.

He gives her the best of the camel butter or whatever it is they use on their skin besides her own allowance. Everybody has an allotted portion, all of these beautiful virgins. But Esther, he gives her the good stuff.

He gives her the best of all of it. Then it says, seven choice maidservants were provided for her from the king's palace. She's got seven beauty assistants.

Have you ever seen actresses where they've got a hairstylist and a cosmetician and a beautician and a nail person and a wardrobe consultant and their personal assistant to carry their stuff so they don't strain themselves? Well, she's got seven maids who just follow her around catering to everyone, pouring the goat's milk into the bath and whipping the beauty preparations, lighting the incense sniffers and all of that. So, seven choice maids, and this choice maidservants means that Hagar picked these women for their expertise. They're not just any old women.

These are the best from the palace. These women probably attended Vashti. They probably at some time or other rotated in and worked on the queen herself.

So this is the top of the line. This is professional beauty service. And he moved her and her maidservants to the best place in the house of the women.

She got the corner room with a view looking out over Shushan. Nice quiet, probably the King's Park out there with the gazelles leaping. So she really is favored and blessed beyond all imagination.

Now, Esther had not revealed her people or family for Mordecai had charged her not to reveal it. Now, there is already bad feeling, there is anti-Semitism abroad in the land. If you want an idea of what this might be like, you know that the Jews had been brought to this part of the world as captives and as slaves and then they were freed.

And now they're living as free people where they were formerly slaves and captives. Does this remind you of anything? Sort of like American history? And you know people that were formerly captives and formerly slaves took a long time before they were looked at and some would argue that they're still not looked at in an equal footing. Lots of problems with being viewed as an equal by the former owners and their people, right? Well, this is kind of the attitude.

You can imagine what this would be like in Persia. So, Esther is beautiful and I could not tell the difference between a lady with a Jewish background and a lady with a Persian background. I mean, you look at them in the ancient drawings and things and they all look like these almond-faced, big-eyed, long-haired, beautiful-looking gals.

How would you know if they were from Judah or from Persia? And evidently, Esther could pass for Persian and nobody really questioned it. And evidently, so could Mordecai because they know that he's her guardian and he's hanging around, as we're going to see, outside the palace. Every day, it says in verse 11, Mordecai paced in front of the women's quarters.

You know, people pretty soon would look out the window and say, who is this guy? And Esther would say, oh, that's my guardian. That's my cousin. He's out there wondering how I'm doing.

But obviously, they didn't associate Esther and Mordecai with being Jewish at all. Now, my question is this. Why did Mordecai tell Esther, don't tell them you're Jewish? Have you seen there's a new program coming on television where they're going to take white people and spray paint them black and kink their hair and send them into the black community and there are black people that they're going to spray paint white and straighten out their hair.

They have these programs, reality television. They do wife swaps where they take two women and swap their households. One's poor and one's rich and one's this and one's that.

Well, now they're taking whole families of white people and black people and they're going to switch them and then follow them around with cameras like that won't be a dead giveaway that something is up and find out how the white people like being black and how the black people like being white and to what extent is it the way you look and to what extent is it how you think. I'm sure they think this is a very intriguing concept. I think it's just weird.

I think it is a weird, goofy idea. But anyway, that's probably why everybody will watch it just to see how it turns out. But there's been a lot of history where especially people who are the product of an intermarriage between races, maybe they have a black mother and a white father or vice versa and then they say, well, she can pass for white or he can pass for white and they don't really stand out.

That's evidently what Esther is doing and Mordecai tells her and counsels her and says, don't talk about your heritage. You just act like all the other Persian women. And we ask ourselves, why would Mordecai do that? He seems to know that it is important and that it is a great opportunity and there is potential that there is a reason why and this is my point.

Why would Mordecai think this? I think it's the same principle as when the parents of Moses looked down and they saw that he was an extraordinary child. Remember that? They looked at him and he was an extraordinary child. And they realized that this was not a child that they could allow to be killed and they put him in the basket in the bulrushes because they recognized that he was divinely favored and that God had a purpose for him and so they risked their lives to save his life.

And Mordecai is now risking his life by putting his ward, his cousin, his adopted daughter into this competition to be the next queen and not saying that she's Jewish. This is a life-risking thing. If this is found out, they could potentially both be killed.

Why would Mordecai do this? I think he looked at the circumstance of her parents dying and this daughter being placed in his charge and her extraordinary beauty and her extraordinary character and spirit and he said, God has a purpose in this. This is not an accident. This isn't happenstance.

There is a reason why she is so extraordinarily gifted in these areas. And I need to put her where God can exploit the gifts that he has given her. Mordecai is a man of prayer.

Mordecai is a man of faith. Does the Bible say this explicitly? No. How do we know it? Because he is used by God in a great way to deliver his people.

And Esther is used in a great way to deliver her people. And God uses prepared people. It doesn't say anything about the preparation.

It doesn't say anything about the prayer or the whatever Bible study they engaged in. God is never mentioned in this entire book. But God uses people of faith and people of character.

What is the interpretation and application of that? If you and I are faithful and if we let God develop in us character, Christ-like character, integrity, faithfulness, we will be used by God in His plan and purpose. There are so few believers that are truly prepared and that are truly faithful that when God finds one, I promise you, He uses them. And if we are one of those faithful believers, we may not understand the purpose, we may not see the reason until the Lord Jesus returns and we get a fresh perspective on our lives.

But trust the Word of God on this. If you are a man or a woman of faith, God will use you. If you are prepared and if you know His Word and if you trust Him, if you pray, if you are that tree planted by the rivers of water, God is going to take that fruit of your life and use it for His glory, always, without fail.

God never prepares and never gifts and never distributes His grace for no good reason. It's our opportunity. We stand in the same place as Mordecai and Esther in the sense that... And did they have any inkling until this opportunity for a new queen came up? Did they ever know that God would make use of their faith and their obedience and their life of prayer? They had no inkling.

They figured, well, we'll just be another generation. And yet, when the time came and the opportunity arose, you can't just say, oh, look, here's a great opportunity. I better start praying and studying my Bible.

You can't get prepared that quickly. You have to be that kind of person. And that's what God calls us to be, to establish a pattern of faithfulness, to be a person of character.

Do you want to be extraordinary in your generation? Be a faithful believer because they are scarce as hen's teeth in this day and age. Anybody can be a slob. Anybody can blend in.

But it is rare. It is a precious thing in the sight of God for someone to care enough about Him and His Word and the great compassion and mercy and love that He expressed in sending Jesus to the cross for us to be people of faith, people of prayer, people of integrity. We're looking at two of them right here.

And when we come back from our break, we're going to see exactly what takes place and what Esther herself has to go through. And it's going to challenge your mind. That's what we'll look at when we come back.