



Esther 1:1-22
 Esther: The God Behind Everything
 “Lifestyles of The Rich and Foolish”

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This morning we dive into a new series of messages that will all come from the book of Esther. Before we read today’s passage and dive into it, let me give a brief introduction to this fascinating book.

Esther is a distinctive book of the Bible for a handful of reasons. First, it’s one of only two books (the other is *Ruth*) that are named after women. Second, and most famously, God is never mentioned once in the book of Esther. As a result, many people – both Christians and Jews – have wondered over the years if it really even should be counted as Scripture. Now, although God is not named, God’s hand is seen throughout, and there’s a strong element of the providence of God – with a lot of events that people might call “coincidences” but we Christians would call “God incidences”. So, there are powerful lessons to learn about God and what it means to be in relationship with Him. Third, there’s very little of *any* Jewish faith or religious “stuff” in here, unlike pretty much every other book of the Old Testament. So not only is God never named, but lots of other things we see in other books are not here: Esther and her people fast, but the text never mentions prayer (and usually fasting and prayer go hand-in-hand). There is no mention of the temple, priests or the priesthood, Jewish history, the law, the prophets, the covenant, Moses/Abraham/David or any other leaders, or the land of Israel.

Also: **There has been debate over the years about whether the events described in Esther are actual history, based on history, or if it’s fiction.** If it’s the latter of those three, then it is, essentially, a really long parable like the ones Jesus crafted to teach spiritual lessons. But usually Jesus’ parables, or even more modern-day fables, don’t usually involve real, historical places or people such as the city or Susa in the Kingdom of Persia ruled by King Xerxes. All of those are in this story. Mordecai, one of the players in these events, is another that archaeology has proven to be a real person. Many of the other people in the book of Esther are not provable – yet – but who knows what further archaeological digs will uncover.

That being said, the book of Esther doesn't *have* to be actual history in order for the truths contained in it to still be true. This isn't the same as the events of Creation or the life of Moses or King David or Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, or the ministry of the early church as described in Acts where the historicity of those people and events makes a lot of difference in whether or not they have any meaning for us today. For instance, if Jesus didn't *actually* teach that the Passover elements point to him, and if he didn't *actually* die on the cross as the once for all sacrifice, and if he didn't *actually* rise from the tomb, then that "kind of" changes things. ☺ A metaphorical Jesus is a useless Jesus.

But with Esther, it's not as crucial. It makes for an interesting debate and there's a lot written on the topic, but in the end it's more something to talk about at Thanksgiving with your family when you need something more engaging than talking about the weather but not as divisive as politics. Personally, I believe the book of Esther describes real people and real events that happened essentially as described.

With that introduction, let's dive in to **Esther 1:1-22 (Read here)**. So, like Ezra that we just spent the last several weeks in, Esther takes place during the time when Israel was under Persian rule. But, where Ezra – and Nehemiah as well – are primarily about events in Jerusalem with exiles who have returned there to rebuild the temple, the city, and their faith...while Ezra and Nehemiah focus on *that*, the events in Esther are in the city of Susa, focusing on the Jews who did *not* return to Jerusalem (at least, not at this point). So, it's the same time-frame, but different locale, and a very different narrative. We know that Xerxes reigned from 485 B.C. to 465 B.C., which puts the events in Esther (3rd year of his reign – so 482 B.C.) in between the first wave of people who returned with Zerubbabel around 535 B.C., and the second wave of people who returned with Ezra around 450 B.C.

And things begin with an over the top party in the city of Susa. **Susa was one of three cities that were considered "capitals" within the Persian Empire at this time.** So, he's there, and invites all the governors, military leaders, and other officials from the 127 different provinces to this 6-month long spectacle...Then in verse 5 we're told that he threw a week-long banquet

where every-day folks from the city of Susa could join the festivities – it became a mingling of Government officials and nobles with school teachers and small business owners.

Primarily, this is an effort to show off his wealth and power, and to unify the empire. He wants to impress those who report to him and solidify his place as King. There was further motivation, however, to unify the empire as they were close to going to battle to try and conquer Greece. And he needed to rally people to that cause – though they ended up losing that battle in 480 B.C. – so the Biblical account of this 6-month leaders gathering fits with what we know about history from other sources; he would want to rally the leaders together and lay groundwork for a battle they engage a year or two later. But the portrayal of him here as someone who liked to boast and show off, was hot-tempered, had advisers who tended to give bad advice, and wasn't a real solid leader with wisdom...that picture of him is supported in other historical accounts of him as well.

So, the scene is set for us here with this ongoing banquet: with lots of opulence, fancy décor, free-flowing wine, and so forth. And, his wife, Queen Vashti, gave a banquet for the women as well. We aren't told if it lasted the 6 months, or if it correlated with the one-week party for the people of Susa...but since verse 10 tells of King Xerxes' request for her coming on the 7th day of his one-week banquet, probably her banquet for the women was also for that one week. Ok...that's a lot of ancient history. Let's turn to something more recent.

Raise your hands if you remember the television show, “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” with Robin Leach. A whole bunch of you just dated yourself. He actually passed away just over 3 years ago at the age of 77. But maybe this 50+ second clip will bring back some memories. **Watch this...**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C4N9OA6MYYM>

Well, I guess they were more prophetic than they realized when they said that these are the stories America will never stop talking about...because Donald Trump was there in the intro piece, and obviously Americans *are* still talking

about him. But: Had Robin Leach been alive in the 5th century B.C., he could easily have done a show on Xerxes. There's a lot of wealth in his life and it's on full display in these verses.

But then he takes things a bit too far, and he makes a request of his wife where things then start to go sour for him. And: **Suddenly, he's no longer living the lifestyle of the rich and famous, but the lifestyle of the rich and foolish.** You've probably heard of the phrase, "Happy wife, happy life" right? Well, apparently Xerxes hadn't heard that, and you all have more wisdom about marriage than this king of one of the largest empires the world has ever seen. He decides – perhaps fueled some by too much wine, though that's not an excuse for what he does just as it's not an excuse for any sexist, demeaning, or just plain stupid behavior – ...he decides that now would be a good time to parade his wife, the queen, in front of the male guests gathered at his party. So, he sends seven attendants to deliver his order that she is to come to him and parade before his guests so they may all admire her beauty – and the unspoken thing of course is that they will envy him and see him as a great guy and that truly *everything/everyone* in the kingdom is under his thumb – even the queen. That's why he wants her to wear her crown: it will emphasize his authority over even her.

So, these guys go to the "ladies only" party with this message. And the queen gives an emphatic, "No way, Jose!" And then she shared her response on social media with the hashtag, "#metoo". **She refuses to be an object to be leered at by a bunch of men, and shown off simply for her husband's ego and pleasure.**

Well, Xerxes is beside himself, but he's not sure what to do about this. I mean, she's at a huge party of her own where all the ladies have just witnessed her defiance of the king and her husband, and so word of this will spread. Xerxes is not sure how to handle it...and so he calls on seven of his experts in the law – what you and I call "lawyers" or "legal counsel" – to help him understand the law and what his options were. He probably should have called his marital counselors rather than legal counselors, but "being King" clearly shapes his thinking more than "being husband" does.

So, in order to prevent the queen's action from inspiring other women in their marriages – the wives of other nobles are mentioned specifically...in order to prevent them from standing up for themselves, one guy, Memukan, has this “genius idea” that she be deposed as queen, banished from the king's presence, and someone found to replace her. This is to be made known throughout the kingdom, in each province's own language so the message is clear. In doing this, they believed they would quell any uprising of women in their households and disobeying their husbands.

Now, **Persian law from that era is famous for its iron-clad staying power, once it's written.** When a King made a law, it couldn't just be undone by a later king, as long it was written down. This is probably one reason why in Ezra, successive kings after Cyrus didn't change his edict that Jews could return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Their hands were tied to a large degree. A new law would actually have to be enacted that changed things, and that wasn't necessarily easy. So, verse 19 explicitly says that this new law regarding the queen should be written down, and then proclaimed far and wide so everyone understands the consequences for behaving similarly. And that's how Esther 1 ends.

This first chapter in many ways is sort of the introduction, or the prelude, to the main story. It sets up what is to follow, and the most significant learning points from the book of Esther are yet to come. But there are a couple things we can take away from this.

First: **Occupations are not as important as relations.** Xerxes lets his role as king – and the ego that gets fed from that role – completely override his relationship with his wife. I know times were different then, and maybe something that seems shocking to us – a husband parading his wife in front of a group of people – might not have felt quite so abnormal to them. But he still let his sense of ego and power and position – which all come from his occupation as the King – he let that get in the way of making a decision that was good for his marriage.

I get it that you can't always put family first. Sometimes the business trip that takes you away from family has to happen, or the work flow means you have

some weeks with 60 or 70 hours and you're not home for dinner for a few nights every once in a while or miss your kid's soccer game. That happens. **But Xerxes shows us that we don't want to get so wrapped up in our work that we lose sight of our relationships.** Your marriage, your kids, or your closest relationships whoever they are, are more valuable than a job or a career. I remember being advised by a wise youth pastor one time as I was considering seminary and going into ministry, when he said, "Don't sacrifice your family on the altar of ministry." I didn't have kids and wasn't even married...and neither did he...but it was the best marriage advice I ever got and it stuck with me. And it applies to whatever field of work you're in. Don't sacrifice your relationships on the altar of whatever it is you do...or that motivates you to do what you do. Don't get so wrapped up in your work, or in how much you make, or what your title is, or how large of team you lead is, that you lose sight of your spouse, your kids, your friends, or even yourself. It's degrading to them, and rips apart relationships.

Second, Xerxes has no idea how or where God will take this...and neither do we. If we think we do, we're no less foolish than he is. Now, probably many of us do know where God takes things here in Esther, and if we don't, all we have to do is keep reading. But what I mean is that the pages of our own lives are yet to be written. God is still working in us and through us to bring about his purposes. As we'll see throughout the Book of Esther, and as I mentioned near the start: God is never mentioned. And yet God is clearly at work. And oftentimes that's how God operates in our lives.

It's like the poem by Mary Stevens that probably many of us are familiar with where she (the author, looking ahead a few years) dies and then along with the Lord looks back on her life. And at each scene of her life, there are footprints on a sandy beach. After the last scene, she looks back at the footprints in the sand. Sometimes there are two sets of footprints, sometimes just one. Where there's just one, it's always at the most difficult times in her life. She asks God why he abandoned her in those difficult times. And God says, "That's not when I abandoned you; that's when I carried you." **We can't always see God working in our midst and maybe sometimes we feel alone. But those are the times when God is carrying us along, and we may not recognize that until later down the road of life.** We certainly

can't expect that we know for sure how God is going to work in the future. We're fools if we think we do. And Xerxes shows us that, as he has *no idea* how his decision is going to set the wheels in motion for God to do some amazing stuff.

So, in Xerxes we see an example of the rich and foolish. He's got wealth beyond what we can probably even imagine. Robin Leach would've visited him if he could've to tell us about his "champagne wishes and caviar dreams" as Leach used to say. But he's foolish – the champagne dries up and the caviar gets moldy. He's foolish in how he treats his wife and probably other people as well, and he has no regard for God. And between the two – between wealth and wisdom – God wants us first to seek wisdom. Proverbs 1:7 says, **"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction"** (Proverbs 1:7). True wisdom comes from God and being in relationship with Him...even fearing him, and allowing that fear not to drive us away from God but to drive us *to* him, trusting that God is not only holy, just, and righteous, but gracious, loving, and forgiving, too. So, let's cultivate that relationship, which will help us cultivate our other relationships and prioritize them as well. And as we do that, we will walk with God each and every day, writing the story of our lives with God carrying us along the journey, living with wisdom from on high. Let's pray...Amen.