

✝
WEEK ONE

Real Life, Real Problems

Day 1 — Ordinary People

Day 2 — Why Are These People Celebrating?

Day 3 — Nowhere to Hide

Day 4 — Imperfect Strength

Day 5 — Who Is in Control?

You might expect that a book entitled *Esther* would begin with someone named Esther: “Once upon a time, there was a girl named Esther.” Well, perhaps it wouldn’t be that obvious, but something like that. Yet that is not at all what we find. Although the book of Esther in the Bible bears her name, Esther does not even make an appearance until chapter two. (If that strikes you as strange, remember that God is never mentioned, not even once, in the entire book!) Instead, chapter one of the book of Esther focuses on two people — two very unusual people: Xerxes, king of the Persian Empire, and Vashti, his queen.

But weren’t these people, well, a little too unusual? What could people like us — average people living average lives — possibly have in common with an ancient Near Eastern despot and his queen? These were some of the most powerful people who have ever lived, people of unimaginable wealth and influence. What could their lives possibly teach us?

First of all, as powerful as these people were, they were still just human beings who, like the rest of us, had real problems. Second, as we will see, these powerful people tried to handle their problems pretty much the way we try to handle ours — without God.

Chapter one, then, is a kind of mirror. Although what we will see in that mirror isn’t very flattering, it will show us what we often do during times of crisis, even though we know better.

✝
WEEK ONE DAY ONE
✝ Ordinary People ✝

PASSAGE: Esther 1:1-4

We will learn a number of important life lessons in Esther 1 — lessons about tough times and how *not* to handle them! As we begin, let's introduce ourselves to one of the key players and to his world.

If you love history as much as I do, you will enjoy placing the story of Esther in its historical and cultural context. If you do not happen to be a history buff, let me encourage you to stay with me anyway. Although this lesson will involve a lot of history, it is impossible to fully benefit from the book of Esther without some familiarity with the people and places involved.

READING ASSIGNMENT: Esther 1:1-4

FOCUS FOR TODAY: Esther 1:1-4

This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush. (1:1)

Xerxes was the Greek name for the Persian king *Khshayarsh* (I can't pronounce it either) who ruled the Persian Empire almost 2,500 years ago, from 485 to 465 B.C. The Hebrews called him *Ahasuerus*, which is how he is identified in a number of English translations. Xerxes controlled an immense empire extending from the borders of India in the east to ancient Cush, or modern Ethiopia, in the southwest. To the northwest, the empire extended to the borders of modern Greece. If you have a globe or a world map, locate the western border of India, and the eastern borders of Greece and Ethiopia.

Based on what you see on the map, the Persian Empire embraced the territory of what modern countries?

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

As you can see, the Persian Empire was vast, embracing what is today Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Israel, Turkey, parts of the Balkan Peninsula, and Egypt to the borders of Sudan and Ethiopia. The Persian Empire was enormous even by modern standards. It was by far the largest and most powerful empire the world had ever seen at that time. And Xerxes was its absolute ruler.

How did this enormous empire come into being and how did Xerxes become its ruler? Prior to Xerxes' time, that part of the world was ruled by a succession of empires, each one larger than its predecessor. The first was the Assyrian Empire, which God used to punish the northern kingdom of Israel. The Assyrian Empire was replaced by the larger and more powerful Babylonian Empire. God used Babylon to punish the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin. It was during the Babylonian period that many Jews were removed from Israel and taken into exile. These Jews, both those who remained in exile and those who would later return home, were central to the story of Esther.

Isn't this all a bit pedantic? How really important were all these empires to God's work among His people anyway?

Using a complete concordance or an online tool such as www.biblegateway.com, look up the words *Assyria/Assyrian*, *Babylon/Babylonian*, and *Persia/Persian*.

How many books of the Bible include references to these empires and people? _____

What does this suggest to you about the importance of these empires to the unfolding story of God's work among His people?

As you discovered, a great deal of the Old Testament is devoted to telling the story of the ancient empires, including most of 1 Kings, all of 2 Kings, most of 2 Chronicles, all of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, and virtually every book of the prophets. Add it up and you will see that these empires and events were crucial to over half of the Old Testament books! The story of these empires is vitally important.

During the reign of the Babylonian king Nabonidus, a Persian named Cyrus began the step-by-step conquest of the Babylonian Empire. The final overthrow of Babylon is an amazing story, one that is recorded in Daniel 5. If you have not read the story lately, you might want to do so in preparation for our further study of Esther. For now, let me give you the highlights.

COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL

Belshazzar was ruling the city on behalf of his father, Nabonidus, who seemed to have been away at the time. Belshazzar took the opportunity of his father's absence to throw a wild party — the same type of party that we will be reading about in tomorrow's lesson. It was during Belshazzar's party that God did something genuinely frightening. At the height of the party, a hand appeared in the banquet room — not an entire body, just a hand — and wrote a message on the wall.

The prophet Daniel, aging and all but forgotten, was summoned to explain the meaning of the message. Daniel explained that God had measured Belshazzar's character and he had come up short; therefore his kingdom was being taken away from him and handed over to the Persians. At that very moment the forces of Persia were crawling under a wall — an opening they had created by diverting a river — and shortly thereafter they conquered the city. With the fall of Babylon, the Babylonian Empire became the Persian Empire, eventually to be ruled by King Xerxes.

What about Xerxes? Who was he and how did he come to power? Briefly, the Persian Empire, though not ethnically Persian, was ruled by seven Persian families who intermarried extensively and who ruled over 127 ethnically diverse provinces. The leader of this group of ruling families was Xerxes. He had inherited the throne from his father, Darius I (not the Darius of Daniel 5). As the curtain opens on chapter one of Esther, Xerxes was ruling over the vast and powerful Persian Empire.

At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa. (1:2)

Xerxes had five palaces, including a summer palace in the mountains near the Caspian Sea and a winter palace in Susa. The city of Susa was located in modern Iran, about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf, near the border with Iraq. (It is amazing how that small and desolate part of the world continues to be important.) In the center of Susa was a walled citadel, or fortress, that served as Xerxes' winter home, and it is here in this palace that the story of Esther began to unfold.

In the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present. (1:3)

The third year of Xerxes' reign would have been 483 B.C. It is important to note these dates because they show us that God doesn't always do things on man's timetable. We tend to focus on the problems and struggles of the moment, while God always looks and plans far ahead. To understand how God works, then, we should keep a close eye on the passage of time throughout the story of Esther. Quite a few years will elapse between chapters one and two, and many more between these and later chapters. So let's start keeping track of time right now.

Verse three mentions a banquet. We will discuss the banquet in greater detail in our next lesson, but for now it is important that we understand the reason for this enormous gathering. The Greek historian Herodotus recorded these events about thirty years after they took place, and he tells us that Xerxes called this meeting to plan an invasion of Greece.¹ Why would Xerxes invade Greece? In a word, pride. Years before, Xerxes' father, Darius I, had just conquered the regions north of the Greek Peninsula, when he encountered the Athenians. This first encounter went against the Persians when a storm sent the Persian navy to the bottom of the Aegean Sea. A second invasion went against the Persians when the Athenians defeated them at the battle of Marathon. This defeat embarrassed and enraged Darius, since Athens was nothing more than a tiny city-state. But Darius died before he could mount another campaign. The task of avenging Persian pride would fall to his son, Xerxes.

Upon taking the throne, Xerxes' first order of business was the brutal suppression of a rebellion in Egypt. But once the Egyptians had been crushed, he turned his attention elsewhere. Determined to uphold both Persian and family pride, Xerxes called a meeting of leaders from throughout his empire to plan another campaign — a decisive campaign, he was confident — against the Greeks. It is this meeting that is recorded in Esther 1.

For a full 180 days he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty. (1:4)

That's six months!

Why might Xerxes have been so eager to display his power and wealth to the rulers from throughout his empire? What purpose might this display have served?

I suspect that, as a relatively new king, Xerxes needed to convince the outlying rulers, many of whom were fellow members of the seven ruling Persian families, that he had the resources necessary to mount yet another campaign against the Greeks. If he were calling on them to contribute men and material to the campaign, they needed to know that he was in a position to make substantial contributions himself.

In *Book Seven* of his *History*, Herodotus summarized the key speeches delivered at the meeting, beginning with a rousing and enthusiastic speech from Xerxes. The mood darkened when an uncle who had been with Xerxes' father at Marathon warned the assembly of the superior capabilities of the Greeks both on land and sea. According to Herodotus, however, Xerxes

regained his confidence when, in a dream, a heavenly personage not only assured him of victory over the Greeks, but of worldwide dominion as well. The campaign against the Greeks was to go forward.² But as in the previous campaigns, the Persians would ultimately suffer defeat.³



Few people in history have lived the life of a Xerxes. We don't usually rule empires or conquer nations. People like us live our lives at a far less pretentious level. Yet, however modest our position in life, we all face challenges — challenges to our position, our power, our prestige, our personhood, and our sense of significance or well being. And when we face these challenges, we all, like Xerxes, tend to fall back on our perceived strengths. We try to impress ourselves and, we hope, the people around us with our talents, our accomplishments, our possessions — with whatever it is about us that we feel will enable us to meet the challenge.

When faced with challenges, we don't all face those challenges in precisely the same way. Each of us tends to depend on our own unique mix of personal strengths and resources to pull us through. When you face a challenge, what do you depend on apart from God?

What challenges or difficulties are you facing right now?

How is your sense of significance, security, or self-worth being threatened? Be as specific as possible.

As you face these challenges, upon what personal strengths and resources do you find yourself drawing? Apart from God, on what achievements, capabilities, or qualities do you tend to depend to pull you through?
