

ESTHER CHAPTER 1

Like any good book, the opening chapters of Esther set the scene, introduce the main characters, and explain how they get put in place for the main part of the story. In particular in chapter 1 we are introduced to King Xerxes, and are told in no uncertain terms about his power and his sheer lack of modesty. In a more subtle way we also see the limits of his power and the way the invisible but not absent God views him, and all other powers like him.

The opening three verses set the scene, and make it clear that Xerxes is no ordinary ruler. He ruled over 127 provinces. His was a significant kingdom, he was the most powerful man in the world. More than that, he knew it and wanted everyone else to know it. The description of the ludicrous banquet (the build up to which lasted nearly six months) emphasises the incredible display of his vast wealth. This would have been very imposing and daunting – especially for the subjects of his vast kingdom such as the Jews.

At the seven day banquet the alcohol flowed freely, and on the final day the King demanded his queen to be paraded in front of the drunken revellers (verses 10-12). However she refuses to come. It is hard not to see the humour and irony of this – the most powerful man in the world shown up by his wife! Yet we also get an insight into his unpleasant character – lustful, and petulant (verse 12).

In verses 13 to 21 we see the Kings solution to the problem. He calls his wise men for advice, and they tell him to dismiss the queen and to find another queen, and to declare this to the whole kingdom.

There is great irony and humour, even satire, in the way this incident is reported. Xerxes is the most powerful man in the world, yet his power is limited – by his wife, by his own laws (see verse 19), and he has to pass a law that “every man should be ruler over his own household”! He has access to “wise men who understand the times” (verses 13-14), yet their advice is ridiculous and foolish.

Where is God in all of this? Obviously, he is working behind the scenes to get Esther into position to help save the Jews later in the story. But more than that,

we see in this chapter a picture of human power and arrogance from his point of view. To us, vast wealth and power can be terrifying and imposing especially as the church is small and often not looked on favourably by those in power. Like the Jews under Xerxes we can feel insignificant and wonder if God cares. But this chapter shows us the foolishness of arrogantly setting yourself up as a supreme ruler. All human power is limited. All sinful human power is laughable – look at Psalm 2 to see God’s response to human kingdoms that oppose him. We need to look at those powers with the eyes of faith, as the Psalmist does in Psalm 73 rather than simply with what we see with our eyes.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

To be honest, it’s going to have to be a bit of trial and error for me as to what is the best way to deal with narrative passages in a house group setting. You need some questions which draw out the key details of the story (but not so many that the group feel patronised), and some application questions – it’s up to you as to whether you feel it’s best to leave all these to the end.

Who is King at the time of the book of Esther? Do we get any indication in the opening verses about how powerful he was (verses 1-3)?

What picture do we get of Xerxes:

- Wealth
- Opinion of himself
- Opinion of others
- Character

In verses 4-11?

The people of God were subjects of Xerxes – some had been allowed to return to Jerusalem, while others remained in exile. How do you think they would feel about Xerxes?

How is Xerxes power limited in this chapter? What can’t he do? How does he decide to deal with this? (Verses 12-22)

If you were listening to this story told for the first time how would you think the teller of the story feels about King Xerxes? Is there any indication of his opinion of him?

Read Psalm 2. How does God view human powers that set themselves up in opposition to him? How should we respond to the rule of Jesus Christ?

Are there any people/groups of people in our life who seem to be all powerful? How should we view them?

Read Psalm 73. Are there any times when we share the temptation of the Psalmist (in verse 2)? It must have been tempting for God's people to feel like that when faced with King Xerxes. God seems to be absent from the scene. How does the Psalmist not give into that temptation (verse 17)?