

ESTHER 2

Like Chapter 1, chapter 2 is setting the scene, introducing characters, and getting things ready for the crisis of chapters 2 and 3 and the solution of the rest of the book.

In leading the study draw attention to the characters in the story. We learn more about the character of King Xerxes, a man who seems powerful but is bound by his own law to replace his wife. The events of chapter 2 seem to come a bit of a time later after chapter 1. We also see more of his sensuality and lustful power, as he stages this horrific beauty contest.

We see the introduction of Mordecai, a man who sat at the king's gate. This does not mean he was a beggar, more that he worked as a kind of civil servant – the “king's gate” being where the business of the kingdom was done. In the introduction of Mordecai the narrator also draws attention to the fact that the people of God are very much a minority in Xerxes kingdom. He is introduced as “a Jew” (verse 5). The word "Jew" has racist, dismissive undertones which we'll see later in the book when Haman talks about Mordecai.

We also see the introduction of Esther. Her role in this beauty contest could be seen as morally questionable. While it is true that we can see the hand of God in her success (verse 17), we can't duck the fact that this also probably means that she out-performed the other women in bed. However it is more likely that rather than being a willing participant in these events she is the victim of coercion. You could not say no to King Xerxes. This law legalised forced marriage to the King (verse 3-4). Don't think of this as an ancient version of the X factor! Mordecai's request to Esther not to speak about her background is possibly another sign of the fact that the Jews were not looked kindly on in Xerxes' kingdom, rather than a sign of a lack of faith.

Having said all that, neither Mordecai or Esther are spotless heroes. They are part of the people of God who have not gone back to Jerusalem after Cyrus passed his edict allowing them to. Perhaps they were comfortable in Persia? The book of Esther shows that God can use us even if we've made foolish/sinful decisions in our past.

At the close of the chapter there is the incident of Mordecai uncovering the conspiracy against the king, and it going unrewarded at the time. It is however recorded in the Kings book. This seems like a minor incident, but its significance will become clear later on.

When we read chapter 2 by itself it seems like a selection of unconnected incidents, and the "ordinary" people seem to be in the hands of the powerful king. However, when we step back, as we can do because we know how this all ends, we can see that even in this (a beauty contest, an unrewarded act of goodness) God is in control and fulfilling his great plan of rescue.

I'd begin the study by getting people to flick to the end of the book - chapter 9:18-23 - to remind them of why the book is written (so we remember God's rescue). Then go back to chapter 2 and just observe what is going on. The question you want people to be asking throughout the study is "Where is God", "What is he doing"? If we are asking that, we are asking the question the Jews would probably have been asking at the time, and it's the question we sometimes ask about our own lives now. The answer is that he is hidden, but in control working out his plan of salvation - slowly and surely.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

In this study you just need to be drawing out the key points (above), and making sure people are grasping what is going on. The best way to do that would be to focus on the main characters.

Read Chapter 9:18-23. Why is Esther written? Keep the big purpose of God's rescue in mind as you read and study chapter 2.

What more do we learn about King Xerxes in chapter 2?

What do we learn about Mordecai in chapter 2?

What do we learn about Esther in chapter 2?

What do we learn about the people of God in chapter 2?

What do we learn about God in chapter 2? As we read this chapter on its own?
As we read it in the light of what happens in the rest of the story?