

## **Esther 1. Introduction. The Invisible Sovereign God**

Pray:

Who loves a good soap opera – Home and Away, the Bold and the Beautiful? I can't say that I do...but as we read the opening chapters of the book of Esther you might think that is exactly what this book sounds like. An historical soap opera full of powerful men, lavishly eating and drinking, showing off their wealth and wanting to show off their women! And then you have the women enjoying a feast and the Queen refusing to be a plaything of the King...

If you don't like soap operas I hope you like satire and a story full of irony. I like commentator David Firth who says that anyone with an irony deficiency needs to have it addressed before reading Esther!

It is a most curious and exciting story and it is the only book in the bible where God is not mentioned. That makes it unique, and therefore we should look for God in the story. He may not be mentioned by name, but as we read I'm sure you will all see the hand of the unseen, invisible, God all over it. While the King may think he is the one with all the power, it is the Sovereign God who is pulling all the strings behind the scenes, with odd coincidences and ironic reversals.

This is the story of a God who cares for and looks out for the persecuted minority. While Esther is about the Jews living in exile, we might think of persecuted Christians in countries like Iran, Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, places where Christians have to live out their faith under threat of death if they do not follow the rules of the country they are living in. Apparently there are something like 380 million Christians living under persecution for their faith.

How do we live as Christians in a strange land? Do we believe in God's providence even when we can't see it working? Do we trust in his commitment to redeem his good world and overcome evil?

What is the setting for this historical soap opera??

The story of Esther is set over 100 years after the Babylonian exile of the Israelites from their land. You will find it after the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. While some Jews did return to Jerusalem, many did not. These are the diaspora. This story is about a Jewish community living in Susa, the capital city of the ancient Persian empire. Along with the book of Daniel, of which there are a couple similarities, it is set entirely outside the land of Israel.

There are four main characters in the story. Two Jews, Mordecai and his niece Esther, (the heroes of the story) and the King of Persia sometimes known as Ahasuerus or Xerxes (I will

refer to him as Xerxes as it's easier to pronounce!) and the Persian official Haman, the cunning villain.

The story begins in the third year of Xerxes reign as King. He reigned over a vast kingdom, 127 provinces from India to Cush, or current day southern Pakistan to the north of Sudan. He was somewhat comical but powerful King, and yet this story shows up an even more powerful God, who humbles those who think they have control.

His third year of reign is 483 BC, a time when he had crushed the opposition and was feeling secure. The story begins with him showing off his power and wealth as he gives a banquet for all his nobles and officials, military leaders of Persia and Media, princes and nobles of all the 127 provinces!

That's a lot of people, and this banquet apparently went on for 180 days as he displayed his wealth 'and the splendour and glory of his majesty'!

After that banquet he held another in the palace grounds, just for seven days this time, for all the people, 'from the least to the greatest who were in the citadel of Susa.' We are given details of the wealth and luxury items on display. The opulence, beauty and colour described is second only to God's temple described in 1 Kings, though I'm not sure how comfortable a couch of gold and silver would be! Xerxes generosity and abundance is almost god-like. The wine flowed freely in golden goblets, in fact by the King's command each guest could drink as much as they liked – no restrictions! There was no tab at the bar that would run out when it hit a certain amount, and you then have to buy your own drinks. You will discover in the story that the King likes to make commands and decrees. But mixing decisions after drinking a lot of wine is not wise as we shall see...

We then hear that Queen Vashti was also holding a banquet for the women in the royal palace. The term queen possibly means that she was the principal member of the King's harem rather than the formal holder of the title Queen. She was Xerxes favourite.

On the seventh day of his banquet, after drinking too much wine, he wants to show off his beautiful 'Queen', one of his other possessions. The detail in this story is quite remarkable; we are given the names of his 7 eunuchs who are commanded to bring Vashti before him so he could display her great beauty, wearing her crown. No robes or clothes mentioned – but I presume she was to come before the people in more than just her crown!

Despite 7 eunuchs going to fetch her under the King's command, Vashti refuses to go! Xerxes was not expecting that and we begin to see that he is actually not all powerful at all. We applaud Vashti for holding on to her dignity and refusing to be shown off like a prize bull. What courage she had to defy the King. What a great message in this little story to stand up against power and abuse in a relationship. She showed such strength.

Of course, King Xerxes is furious, and she will suffer the consequences of her refusal, but she can hold head up high.

The King wants to assert his authority, but he doesn't know what to do with Vashti, so he calls his wise men for their advice. We will see that Xerxes does not make any decisions on his own, so much for his claim of power! Again, he names all seven of the advisors, Memucan being the spokesman. Xerxes assumes there is a law for everything and so he asks them what should be done to Vashti according to the law?

Surely there is no specific law for this situation, but the wise men take advantage and blow this domestic issue up out of all proportion. They claim that her behaviour will be heard by all the women who will now follow suit and disobey their husbands and there will be no end of disrespect and discord! If only the husbands respected their wives in the first place this would not be an issue at all, but wives were obviously regarded as objects and possessions.

A royal decree was made that would ban Vashti from entering the King's presence ever again and a 'better' woman (one who would obey him) should be found for the King. It is laughable that from this one refusal, a script was written in each language of the empire and dispatched 'proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household.' Ironically, if they had kept the scandal of Vashti's refusal inhouse, then all the women in the empire would not have heard of Vashti's boldness, but now they will know, and maybe some will show some courage to stand up to their husbands despite the script that has gone out!

And so we come to the end of chapter 1 of this interesting book of Esther. If you stopped at chapter 1 you would wonder what sort of story is this to be included in God's word – the bible?! For indeed there has been no mention of God or his people. We have heard of a King with a big head, who appears a bit ridiculous, who likes to show off and splash his wealth around. He might have a big empire, but we begin to see that he is not as powerful as he thinks when Queen Vashti refuses to obey his command.

As we continue the story we will discover the irony in this whole situation, the decree to banish Vashti, will open the door for Esther's arrival, which we will hear about next week. While she will be demure and obey the King, her actions with the invisible God on her side, will show who in fact is all powerful. And we will see the reversal of the King's supposed irrevocable decrees.

Can we learn anything from this opening chapter, is there an application for our lives?

I paired this reading with one from John's gospel where Jesus is talking about glory. Jesus is glorified by the Father and was given authority over all people. Jesus is glorified as he gives his life so that we might have eternal life. Jesus is the all powerful one, who's glory is shown in humble obedience to the Father.

As his chosen and loved people we are to give him glory and we are to obey his commands.

Kings and leaders will come and go, and those who like to show off their power and wealth will be humbled. We may have to learn to live under some leaders who do not behave well, who do not act with wisdom and compassion for their people. I'm sure you can all think of some, but I will not point any out! We need to live as strangers in this land, with our first allegiance to Jesus, giving him the glory and trusting that he is at work, even if we can't see it, knowing that he will one day come again in his full power and glory.

Jesus is the King to follow and model. If we learn anything else from this first chapter of Esther, it is not to be like Xerxes, showing off our wealth, thinking we are all powerful; we should not get drunk and make silly decisions and we should not treat our spouses as possessions to obey our every whim!

May you enjoy this little book of Esther, may it point us to Jesus, to put our trust in him.

Let's pray. May the Holy Spirit open our eyes to see the God who often seems unseen. May we see Jesus, as the glorified Son of God, who humbled himself and was obedient even to death, who did not flaunt his power, and as we read in Philippians, did not consider equality with God as something to be used to his own advantage. Lord, we look for that day when all the Kings, all the Presidents, all the Prime Ministers, all the people, will bow their knee before the King of Kings, Jesus Christ. Come Lord Jesus we pray. Amen.