

Who really rules the kingdom?

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[0:00] Our chapter tonight opens on King Xerxes. In the last chapter, as we heard from Mark last week, we saw this king in high spirits, and there was some humour to be found in the irony of the first chapter as the king in high spirits.

The king was on a high of drink and arrogance in what can only be described as a festival of indulgence.

And we had this very laughable point, which was that the banquet was to include all people from the least to the greatest for this big powerful king, and yet he couldn't even get his own wife, Queen Vashti, to come along.

If you haven't heard Mark's thoughts on this, I would encourage you to do go and listen to that. It's on the Calvary website. So let's just recap where we left off.

With anger burning inside him, King Xerxes assembled wise men to give him advice on what to do about his queen refusing to join him.

[1:30] In some way he sought payback. These wise men told the king to decree that Vashti must never again enter his presence and that she should be replaced.

The text says that this idea pleased the king. There's no doubt that chapter one is indeed very present with ironic humour.

But as this chapter opens, chapter two, the first verse, this first verse, I think holds a magnifying glass up to what we've already heard, because suddenly the whole mood is inverted.

The king is certainly not now pleased. So what happened? At this point, the king's anger had subsided and the text says that he was remembering Queen Vashti in both what he and her had done.

Now I would invite you to remember all of the times, as many as you can, that you've reacted out of anger. And then count how many times, how many of those times you regret.

[2:55] I'm sure the number will be very high. Whilst the king, as we see, is pensive here, may be thinking also of his political future.

I don't think the king is completely emotionless in this. We've already seen how emotional a person he is. And we'll see it again many times in the story.

I think what we are seeing here in the king is something of sadness and regret as he thinks of Vashti. And then as we hold this first verse up, as we said as a magnifying glass over the last chapter, I would suggest that under the ironic comedy is revealed something of a tragedy.

We saw how absent the queen was from the king's side in the celebrations. As he squandered away his days seeking pleasures for himself, Vashti was tucked away in the palace at a distance with her own banquet.

He was seeking her on the very last day of the feast, only for the purpose of flaunting her beauty. I think that's quite sad.

[4:11] So it's easy to write off the first chapter as a humorous tale about an ungrateful king and a stubborn queen.

And I think there is some humor there in that. But now as we get to the second chapter, we're faced with a reversal of the picture as we consider the king's thoughts.

We see the king appears to be regretful and to have a heavy heart. If we then extend this consideration to Queen Vashti, a woman who was clearly a woman of integrity, and then we wonder what she was thinking.

We can now imagine how she must have felt. Suddenly being exiled from her king, and probably her home too.

Then divorced for such a ridiculous reason. No one really knows what happened to her after this incident. There are some schools of thought that suggest that she was executed.

[5:22] I'm not so sure that that's the case. So as we peek into this image of the king's thoughts, we see this king and queen are not simply chess pieces to further a game, but are real human hearts and minds with feelings and attachments.

And at the end of the day, in this case, at the end of the feast, marriage is God's institution. And no matter how much it was corrupted between this man and this woman, for these two people, it was a marriage that was now permanently broken.

So as we enter this chapter, we're seeing consequences of Xerxes' actions. He will never see his queen again. And for all his power and wealth, he can't even fix the situation.

He can't change the law that he decreed. And no amount of wealth or power can fix the problem of the heart.

So here is the great king from chapter 1 in a complete ironic inversion. The king is unsatisfied, he's powerless, and he's lonely.

[6:50] And so what happens? What is the solution? Verses 2 and 3. King Xerxes is presented with yet more advice.

This time it's the solution to him being without a queen. As irony hears, remember, it was friendly advice from colleagues that caused him to be without a queen in the first place.

The king's personal attendants propose a search for the replacement of the queen by gathering together many beautiful young virgins from all over the provinces of the king's realm.

So how many young women would there have been? Well, we don't know, but chapter 1, verse 1, tells us that there were 127 provinces.

So at the very least, there's likely to be hundreds of young women. They were all to be brought back to the citadel, the king's citadel, into the harem.

[8:00] So this would be a specific part of the citadel, that is the king's fortress. And this harem was reserved strictly for women only.

And it's here we're introduced to Hegai, who was to be in charge of the women. So Hegai was a eunuch, meaning this was a man who had been castrated for service to the king's women.

Verse 4. How is the king to select Vashti's replacement? Well, whoever could please the king the most would be queen.

The text says that this advice appealed to the king, and he followed it. Which is not surprising, since the kind of pleasure that we're talking about here is sexual pleasure.

Isn't it amazing that all the problems that he's facing came about from prioritizing worldly and fleshly pleasures, and yet he still thinks those same things will fix the problem?

[9:17] Have you also noticed how the king seems to struggle actually making decisions for himself and thinking for himself? Reminds me of the words of Jesus as his king is led into all kinds of trouble.

If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit. And so this stage is set for the gathering of all the young women to begin.

And this is where the text pauses from the narrative to introduce us to Mordecai and to Esther for the first time. Verses 5-7. So we're first introduced to Mordecai, and the text tells us a few things about him.

We tell firstly that he's in the citadel. Verse 19 and chapter 5, verse 9, both place him specifically at the king's gate, so it's likely he's employed in some capacity in that area.

Next, we find out that he's a Jew. That is to say, he is one of God's people. We're given some related genealogy, and the text makes clear that he was from a family in exile.

[10:33] So he does not belong to this worldly kingdom. He's not a native. We find out that Mordecai has a cousin called Hadassah, whom he took as his daughter when her parents died.

So he raised her. You see, she is also called Esther. So Hadassah would have been a Hebrew name, which apparently means myrtle tree.

And that, well, may have been because of her complexion. That's what's assumed. Here's a picture of a myrtle tree. You can draw your own conclusions.

So Esther would have been her Persian name. Apparently, in more modern times, this means star. According to the text, Esther had a lovely figure and was very beautiful to look at.

As is a myrtle tree, actually. So in the previous chapter, we had a clear picture of this worldly Medo-Persian empire. It was a picture of power and pomp, as we heard from Mark.

[11:50] Here, we're given an introduction to God's people living inside this kingdom. Now, the exact status of an exile living inside the Medo-Persian empire isn't known.

But it would have definitely been a position of weakness, which runs contrary to the image of power and opulence that we've seen of the king and of the empire.

Verse 8. Text here, after introducing Mordecai and Esther, resumes its narrative flow. As the king's order rolls out, we can see all the horrific details of this process to find a queen begin.

Now, it's unlikely that any of the young women that were taken to the king's palace would have actually had the choice to go. They probably would have been taken whether they liked it or not, permanently usurped away from their families and their friends and from their loved ones, all for the king's pleasure.

Esther is among one of these many young women. We read that as she is placed under the care of Hegai, the eunuch, she finds favour with him and she is elevated almost instantly in position, taking the best place in the harem with special beauty treatments and food given to her in preparation for meeting the king.

[13:33] She gets all of these privileges. So we see God's hand clearly at work here, affecting hearts and minds and directing them to fulfil his purpose in putting Esther on the path to being queen.

Verses 10 and 11. But Esther doesn't acknowledge publicly her identity as being Jewish or belonging to God.

Her primary motivation being obedience to Mordecai as we see not just in verse 10 but later in verse 20. So commentators are in many different positions on this time of secrecy with Esther. I think what we are simply seeing are very human characteristics of these two very human people. Mordecai cared very much for Esther as is clear from verse 11.

Every day he was finding a way to communicate with her as she was in the harem to see how she was and to see what was happening to her. Most likely this was through others that were serving there.

[14:54] God's people as we are shown here have a heart of care and a closeness to each other even in times when they are physically apart.

It's a demonstration of love that contrasts the relationships that we've seen from the Medo-Persian Empire in this story which are mostly entirely self-seeking.

So with this in mind maybe what we are seeing in this secrecy of Esther by telling her to keep quiet about her background Mordecai is trying to protect Esther and is reacting in a fearful way to potential threats.

Esther surely would have been victimised as a Jew in the Harem. It probably would have been quite a dangerous position for her to be in too. So that's Mordecai's position.

Esther on the other hand in keeping quiet on her background seems to be reacting more out of obedience and respect for Mordecai more than reacting out of fear.

[16:07] He was her father figure and she loved him greatly. Obviously I don't think the message here is that secrecy and fear of the truth is okay.

It's certainly not a legitimate walk forward. I think what we see instead is that despite these human failings God continues to use them to fulfil his purpose.

Nothing changes God's faithfulness. It is sure and it is rock solid. And we'll see later in the book how the truth of this situation is actually brought to light.

Verses 12 to 14 give us the grim details into the process of finding a queen for the king. Each young woman would undergo a year of physical preparation and they would have their night with the king. Anything she wanted that is to where she would have been given to take with her to the king's palace. Then in the morning she would be taken off to a different part of the harem and there she

would stay indefinitely unless she particularly physically pleased the king.

[17:34] Then she would be called back only occasionally to provide the king with more sexual pleasure unless of course she was chosen to be a queen.

There was no return to normal life for these young women now concubines of the king after their night with him.

Each concubine was to have the status of a wife but it would be of a much lesser status than the queen. So it's likely they would never even remarry.

They'd just be stored away and called back whenever it pleased the king in much the same way that we saw him treat Queen Vashti in the last chapter.

To the king the hearts and the hopes of all of his knightly partners are nothing more than disposable as he sifts through them one by one in the pursuit of perfection and contentment.

[18:44] Verses 15 to 17 Finally it's Esther's turn to spend a night with the king. I'd like to point out here that chapter one starts in the third year of the king's reign and in this chapter in verse 16 it tells us that Esther was taken to the king in the seventh year of his reign.

So it took four years for Esther to get her turn with the king. If he had one young woman every night over those four years he would have had over a thousand young women even with a day off in a week.

and as Esther prepares to see the king we see an element of her humility and modesty as she asks for nothing more than what Hagar had suggested for her.

Esther's beauty I think isn't determined by what she puts on her body but by the qualities that God has already clothed her with.

Although that's the truth let's not get this wrong this immoral competition of sexual pleasure is still ongoing and Esther's beauty is still grossly misused and so she wins the king's favour.

[20:17] In Esther a new queen is established so the king gave a great banquet this was Esther's banquet unlike the last one this time Xerxes queen was very present so as we mentioned this is the seventh year of the king's reign and I'd just like to take a quick detour from the text to talk about that for a second the number seven in the bible is often marked as a number of completion most famously in the book of revelation and we see it scattered here throughout the beginning of the book of Esther right up until this point where Esther becomes a queen and I'd just like to give my personal thoughts on this occurrence of the number seven when queen

Vashti refused to join the king in the garden party seven eunuchs tried to bring her back seven eunuchs carried the news seven nobles decided the fate of queen Vashti and it was on the seventh day the last day of the feast where queen Vashti was removed from her position seven female attendants prepared Esther for the king and it was in the seventh year of his reign where she was commissioned as queen as we've just heard and then the sevens ceased to be a feature this is really just my speculation at this point but I think what we're seeing here is not a coincidence what Aaron sees here is a mark of or a signature of God's hand directing the business of King Xerxes to achieve the Lord

God's own good purposes which is to establish Esther as queen for the good of his people our Lord opens and closes doors with his own perfect timing even if to us massive amounts of time seem to pass not even the highest ranks of a massive vile and corrupt empire or its king can keep God from his throne and this begs us at this juncture to ask this question who is really in charge of this story verses 19 to 20 as this chapter draws to a close we see the beginning of Esther's time as queen it's not certain how much time has passed but we are reminded that

Esther's identity in relation to Mordecai and as one of God's people is still a secret I think this comment in the chapter these verses on the continued secrecy is likely a narrative device by the writer to show that there is still an element of danger present and there's still a strong connection between Esther and Mordecai even after all of these years have passed she is still caring and obedient to her father figure despite her position her heart is still in its place so some time has passed verse 19 tells us that virgins are once again being assembled this is important as for the king the chapter is closing in the same way that it opened for the king the search for fulfilment and

contentment hadn't ended with

Esther simply having a queen didn't solve the problem and nor did satisfaction physically because as was pointed towards in verse 1 the problem was in the king's heart and so despite all of his money and his wealth he couldn't fix the problem and this sad exploitation and abuse of his partners his wives simply continued verses 21 to 23 and we have this incident which we'll need to keep in mind for a future talk so I'll only touch on it here Mordecai on duty at the king's gate foils a plot by the king's guard to assassinate the king he reports it to queen Esther who informs the king notice here she had no desire whatsoever to gain some kind of dishonest approval from the king and take credit for herself and she gave all the credit to

[25:41] Mordecai and I think this shows something of her just nature so after an investigation Mordecai is found to be telling the truth and the two guards who planned to kill the king were impaled on poles Mordecai Mordecai could have not said anything at all Xerxes was hardly a pleasant person or someone you want to instinctively protect maybe maybe Mordecai was thinking to protect the queen by proxy I think there are too many variables at this point to make a specific judgment on his motives what we do know is that he was loyal to the king and this was not forgotten as we'll find out later on in the book his good service though it appeared to go unnoticed and unrewarded was in fact recorded so we come to the end of the chapter what can we make of this story and what can we take away from it very difficult to make an application here we're really still at the introduction of the book and so the big picture for the book is yet to be uncovered so I don't think it would be fair to draw conclusions from things that are yet to happen as it were so what

I'd like to do is just recount my top three points that we've encountered along the way in this text and draw some conclusions from them so last week we had a top-down picture of the this worldly Medo-Persian kingdom and its rulers both the kingdom and the people were ruled by self-centered love of power possessions physical pleasure and wealth in this chapter we zoomed in to the details of the lives of some of these people living in the empire it's point number three I call it lessons from the world's people King Xerxes throughout the chapter had an unquenchable thirst that was clear even after years of different partners if you like though he found his queen he just carried on plowing through the hearts and lives of other people in a search for contentment through the perfect partner but the problem all along was in his heart no amount of power no amount of wealth no amount of physical satisfaction no possessions could ever bring about a content heart anything anything physical in this earthly kingdom will spoil and fade or run out eventually only the Lord God Jesus Christ can give the gift of real contentment and our priority in every situation should be him that's for our physical needs God the Father knows our physical needs and if we seek his kingdom first he will give us what we need that's from Matthew 6 you know my mind goes to Jesus as he spoke to the woman at the well as he said whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst indeed the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life Jesus is the only eternal and unending source of contentment for our hearts and only through him can we find that point number two lessons I call this lessons from God's people Mordecai and Esther found themselves living in this corrupt and obscene kingdom though mistakes were made though they themselves were definitely not perfect we do see them care very much for each other they don't give up as the years passed in horrible circumstances they remained patient Esther remains obedient to her father figure Mordecai and Mordecai never ceases to check in on Esther daily there is a continued presence from her father figure now these I think are good lessons for Christians living in a world of corruption and perversity today this is a fallen world we live in an empire of sin whatever situation we find ourselves in as Christians we can be by God's grace patient and obedient to the father because we know that even if we can't see him with our eyes he tells us to be strong and courageous to not be afraid and not be discouraged for he is with us wherever we go

Joshua 1 9 through our Lord Jesus Christ we can be patient and obedient this takes me to my my main thought on this story which is really to answer the question that I had asked earlier who is really in charge of this kingdom the answer is unsurprisingly God the world before us might well be full of the evil that humans have established tyrannical kings broken relationships executions!

[32:21] persecutions but God is still in charge this doesn't mean that God endorses all of this sin but instead God will use all of the purposes of men even at their darkest and turn them around for his own good purposes for his people and for his kingdom we can rely on that Romans 8 28 says and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him who have been called according to his purpose now let's close with a verse that gives us a glimpse of God's people in God's kingdom this is from the book of Revelation and he said these are they who have come out of the great tribulation they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the lamb therefore they are before the throne of

God and serve him day and night in his temple and he who sits on the throne will shout to them with his presence never again will they hunger never again will they thirst the sun will not beat down on them nor any scorching heat for the lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd he will lead them to springs of living water and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes Amen