

Let's Worship God

23rd-28th July 2018

Esther



Esther

Esther

Monday - Esther 1:1-4 - Setting the Scene

For the next few weeks we will be looking at the book of Esther using study notes written by Rev. Jonny McCollum. Esther is a book of surprises. It's surprising because of where the story is set: not in Jerusalem, but in Susa, hundreds of miles away, deep inside idolatrous pagan territory. It's surprising because of who is in it: not fearless superheroes, but frightened, ordinary people. It's surprising because of the story itself: a tale of corrupt conspiracies and deadly danger.

In short, Esther is a messy book. It will sadden us, make our skin crawl, and confront us with appalling dilemmas. It will show us the disastrous effects of sin; both in God's enemies and in God's people. It's not the fairy tale people think.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of all isn't what we see in the book; it's what we DON'T see. Feel free to flick through the chapters if you doubt me, but you will never once see God. No miracles, no prophecies, no fire and brimstone from heaven. No mention even of his name! God is nowhere to be seen.

So, why did he give us a surprising book like this? Because our story is not so different. Just like Esther and the other Jews, we live in an idolatrous world and are surrounded by those who reject God. Just like Esther, we are confronted with the cataclysmic effects of rebellion. Just like Esther, the odds are firmly stacked against us.

Wouldn't it be easier if God just did something? Couldn't he perform a miracle or write a message in the sky? Yet he doesn't. Sometimes it seems like God isn't there or simply doesn't care. Yet, God does work in the book of Esther. He works in surprisingly ordinary ways in the midst of the mess and even THROUGH the mess. We may not see him, but his fingerprints are all over it!

It's the same in your story. Yes, it's hard to follow God in a hostile world. Yes, it seems like everything has gone badly wrong. But look again: his fingerprints are all over it! We just need the faith to see.

Questions

1. It was really hard to be a follower of God in Susa. What do you find hardest about following God where you are?
2. Can you think of any other messy situations in the Bible where God used the mess to bring about good?

Prayer Points

Pray that God would use the book of Esther to help you see his work clearly and help you swim against the tide.

2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side - let Israel now say - Psalm 124:1

Praise: Psalm 77:11-15 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.

Esther

Tuesday - Esther 1:1-9 - Ahasuerus Shows Off

Winston Churchill was a master of memorable insults. He once said about Clement Attlee: "He is a very modest man...with a great deal to be modest about." Today we meet a man who was the polar opposite of Attlee: a very proud man with a great deal to be proud about.

Ahasuerus, also known as Xerxes (the Greek version of his name) was the most powerful man in the world. Here's what he had to say about himself: "I am Xerxes, the great king, king of kings, king of countries containing many kinds of men, king in this great earth far and wide..." He wasn't wrong. He ruled over 127 provinces covering vast swathes of Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (v1). He commanded the most formidable army any of his enemies had ever seen. Xerxes was a proud man...with a great deal to be proud about. He was also a passionate evangelist. With great enthusiasm he spread the message of his own power, wealth and splendour. What better way to show that than by throwing a massive party? The guest list was a Who's Who of the Persian Empire: princes, governors, generals and nobles, and there at the top table, supreme over these prominent men was Xerxes himself (v3). Talk about a photo opportunity!

There were 6 months of festivities, with every detail designed to display Ahasuerus' majesty. The wine was practically unlimited and no doubt the food was just as extravagant. The lavish surroundings would have made Buckingham Palace look grotty by comparison. Even the beauty of Ahasuerus' trophy wife tells us that this was a man to be feared and revered.

Of course, this presented a problem for God's people. Imagine telling your children that God blesses those who follow him when they could see the wagons of wine being carted to the pagan palace. Imagine how hopeless they must have felt when this "King of Kings" set his wrath against them. Who could possibly bring hope to a situation like that?

Questions

1. Do you ever look the success of those who reject God and wonder if following Christ is worth it? Where can you find the encouragement you need?
2. Do you ever get intimidated by the power and influence of those who reject God? Where can you find the courage you need?

Prayer Points

1. Pray that God would help you to see the emptiness of success without him.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side - let Israel now say - Psalm 124:1

Praise: Psalm 73A:7-10 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.

Esther

Wednesday - Esther 1:10-15 - Ahasuerus Shows the Cracks

The beauty of the surroundings is in stark contrast to the sleaziness of the revellers. Perhaps you can imagine the bravado at the top table: guests boasting over the size of their houses, boasting over the clothes in their wardrobes, even boasting over the women in their beds.

Of course, Ahasuerus isn't one to be outdone. You can almost imagine him saying, "You think that's impressive? Wait until you see who sleeps in my bed!" It's grubby and it's sleazy; it's also the world we live in.

So, the rather tipsy Ahasuerus makes a fateful decision. He summons his wife, the beautiful Vashti, to parade herself for the party guests. She is to come, without asking questions, in order to be ogled by the king's slobbering pals. It doesn't matter what Vashti thinks of this sleazy show; what the king wants, the king gets. In order to reinforce the point, he sends 7 of his finest men to make sure Vashti complies.

Cue the first big surprise: Vashti says NO! This was a humiliation for Ahasuerus: the man who controls 127 provinces can't even control his own wife! Moments ago he was dazzling senior officials with the food on the table; now he has egg on his face.

Vashti wasn't a believer, yet by this simple act of defiance, she teaches God's followers a vital lesson. It is possible to say no. It is possible to resist. Those who rebel against God may hold all the cards, but they can never compel us to join them in their rebellion. Faithfulness to God IS possible.

It's early days in the Book of Esther. Yet already God is inviting us to look at the kingdom of Satan and see that it's full of cracks. Things aren't as hopeless as they seem.

Questions

1. The Book of Esther can sometimes make our skin crawl. Why is that an encouraging thing for us when we read it?
2. Vashti was able to say no to the king's demand. Why should believers be even more able than she was to say no to the world?

Prayer Points

1. Pray that God would give you the courage and determination to be faithful to him and say no to the demands of the world.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side - let Israel now say - Psalm 124:1
Praise: Psalm 119:Part5A - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.

Esther

Thursday - Esther 1:13-22 - Ahasuerus Shows Who's Boss

Ahasuerus (or Xerxes as he's also known) has to do something. He has been humiliated in front of the most influential people in the empire. He has been publicly defied and he cannot risk others following in Vashti's footsteps. So what does he do? He convenes the cabinet of course!

I wonder if the long list of names in v14 is supposed to make us laugh. Ahasuerus has been disrespected by one individual woman and so he responds by gathering 7 of his finest nobles to dream up their master strategy for responding to this problem. It's a laughable overreaction!

Even more laughable is the grand scheme they come up with. Imagine being a fly on the palace wall: "Let's send messengers to every corner of the empire, to Europe, to Africa, to Asia, and let's tell every single subject that the king is to be respected! More than that, let's tell every single wife that she is to respect her husband!"

For one thing, it's counterproductive; it guarantees that everybody will hear about Vashti's snub and the King's weakness. For another thing, it's completely unenforceable; if Ahasuerus can't compel his own wife to obey him, he'll have his work cut out forcing others' wives to do the same.

Yet, he has to do something. The great "King of Kings" can't just sit back and be disrespected. And so, he rants and he raves and he goes red in the face like a teacher who has lost control of the classroom. He might as well be shaking his fist at the sun and ordering it not to shine.

There's a great irony in this passage. Ahasuerus is desperate to show who's boss, and that's exactly what he does - but not in the way he planned. We will soon see that God uses this drama to deliver his people and punish his enemies.

Ahasuerus may have lost control; the real King of Kings is calm, silent, and on the throne.

Questions

1. How did the king's show of strength actually demonstrate his weakness?
2. Why do we sometimes forget that Jesus is on the throne? What can help us to remember?

Prayer Points

1. Pray that God would convince you of the fact that Jesus Christ is on the throne. Pray that none of the events you hear about will shake you from that conviction.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side - let Israel now say - Psalm 124:1

Praise: Psalm 110 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.

Esther

Friday - Esther 2:1-4 - Not a Cinderella Story

It's a well known and well loved story: a poor, downtrodden girl with a heart of gold auditions to become a princess. She meets her prince charming, is plucked from rags to riches, and they both live happily ever after.

That's the story of Cinderella. It is not the story of Esther. Sure, there are some similarities, at least on the surface. But if we allow the story to be "Disneyfied", we're going to miss one of the key lessons of Esther: God works in our awful circumstances.

Chapter 2 picks up the story 4 years later. We know from history that Ahasuerus had suffered a humiliating military defeat, so perhaps he was feeling sorry for himself. Perhaps he remembered the times that Vashti was able to cheer him up...and then regretted his rash, wine fuelled decision.

So, after sitting down with his advisors, he had a new plan: Vashti couldn't come back, so he'd better get a newer, better model.

So the word goes out: the King is looking for a wife! The qualifications? Beautiful. Young. Virgin. Doesn't that tell you all you need to know?

Don't let Disney cloud your vision: this isn't Prince Charming looking for a Belle of the Ball; this is Hugh Hefner, with his sneering grin, looking for his latest playboy bunny. These girls weren't met by a fairy godmother with a shiny glass slipper; they were met by soldiers with pointy steel spears. These teenage girls were ripped away from their families and forced into the clutches of a monstrous pervert; doomed to become real life barbies, taken from their box when the king wants to play.

I promise, we'll see a glimmer of hope tomorrow. But for now, we need to see just how sleazy this contest was. This true story tells us us something about God: he is with his people in the midst of pain and despair. It's not a Cinderella story; it's something so much better.

Questions

1. How would you feel if God only ever worked in ideal circumstances?
2. Can you think of ways in which God has brought you comfort in the midst of your pain?

Prayer Points

1. Pray for Christians who are going through really hard times. Pray that they would know God's presence and that he would uphold them in the midst of their pain.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side - let Israel now say - Psalm 124:1

Praise: Psalm 91A:1-4 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.

Esther

Saturday - Esther 2:5-11 - "There was a Jew in Susa"

We've already seen that this story is full of heartache, drunkenness, and sexual deviancy. It features some truly reprehensible characters; and God is nowhere to be seen. Yet, his fingerprints are all over it. vs alerts us to this with six simple words: "There was a Jew in Susa". God may not be mentioned in the book, but his people are! God will not sit back and watch disaster unfold.

We're introduced to two of the story's main characters, and they're both God's people. Esther is a beautiful young girl, possibly only in her early teens. Her parents have both died, and so her cousin Mordecai is bringing her up.

These are six surprising words. The Jews had been taken into captivity because of their rebellion against God and many of them had found themselves in the Persian Empire. Yet, years before Ahasuerus took the throne, God in his mercy had moved King Cyrus to allow the Jews to go back to Jerusalem. You would expect a God-fearer to jump at the chance to return to the promised land that God had given his people.

Yet, here are Mordecai and Esther, not in Jerusalem, but in the heart of idolatrous Persia. Why are they there? Surely they'd be better off in Jerusalem? Even their names raise awkward questions, since they're based on the names of false Persian gods.

I'm not looking to bash either Mordecai or Esther. Yet, this introduction does raise some awkward questions. Are these two people paying the price for the poor decisions of their families? Were those who came before them drawn in by the world? Is moral compromise the reason why Esther and Mordecai find themselves here in Susa rather than the land God gave his people?

This story is a messy one. Living in exile often is. And yet, in the midst of the mess we see a glorious phrase. "THERE WAS A JEW". God never abandons his people, no matter how messy their situations may get.

Questions

1. Mordecai and Esther's ancestors could have chosen to go back to the promised land (Ezra 1), but they didn't. Why might they have stayed?
2. Do you have sinful priorities that you need to repent of?

Prayer Points

1. Give thanks for how God never forgets his people, even when they are surrounded by those who rebel against Jesus Christ.
2. Use prayer points from your congregation.
3. Pray for family matters.

Memory Verse

If it had not been the Lord who was on our side - let Israel now say - Psalm 124:1

Praise: Psalm 95:1-6 - See www.rpglobalalliance.org for Psalm tune helps.

The goal of Let's Worship God is to encourage and help you in your worship of God each day.

**God tells us that
Ezra read from
the book of the Law
day after day
and that
the people of God
were filled with joy!**

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