

ESTHER

When we decide what we are going to study in our House Groups we very deliberately try to get a balance of all the different parts of the Bible, to make sure we are covering what the apostle Paul describes as “the whole counsel of God”. So we’ve just been studying 2 New Testament letters – 1 and 2 Thessalonians, and before that we’ve spent time in Psalm 119, and John’s gospel in the upper room discourse. Now we are heading back into the Old Testament, into the book of Esther.

Esther is unique of all the books of the Bible for lots of reasons. It is I think the most gripping and racily told story in the Bible – it reads quickly, like a John Grisham thriller. It’s funny and exciting. It’s full of great characters. Haman is a really bad guy. Xerxes is a particularly stupid king. Esther and Mordecai are seemingly ordinary people caught up in great events.

Last week our group read through the whole book aloud, and I’d really recommend that each group does that. I know Graham’s group did that as well. It only takes about half an hour, but it’s good to get the flow of the story in your head before you slow down and study it week by week. It’s also good to get a feel for how the story is told.

So what’s the plot of Esther? The story itself does not take place in the heart of things for Israel – we’re not in Jerusalem, we are in Susa, the capital of the Persian empire. Remember God’s people have been taken off into exile. And by the time of Esther some of the Jews have been allowed to go back to the promised land. But not all have gone – some have stayed. And the great leader of the time is King Xerxes (or Ahasueras). And this book focuses on an incident in the life of two Jews – Esther and her guardian Mordecai.

In the opening chapters 2 important, but apparently unrelated things happen. Esther finds her way into King Xerxes harem. She wins a beauty competition and becomes one of his wives. And Mordecai discovers a plot to kill the King and foils it, and this is recorded in the Kings scrolls.

But the key incident of the whole book is Chapter 3:1-11

READ Ch 3:1-11

This is the turning point. Esther's people are under threat, by the manipulations of Haman the Agagite. What will happen? Who will rescue them? Well, as the story continues we see that Esther is in just the right situation to help, and Mordecai challenges her to do something.

READ Ch 4:12-14

So she does, and through a combination of events Haman's pride is burst and he is hanged, Mordecai is exalted and the Jews are able to defend themselves against their enemies. Read it to see how – I'll only ruin the story by summarising now.

THE PUZZLE OF ESTHER

Now, as exciting as the story of Esther is, and as gripping as the characters are, it's fair to say that it is a puzzling book. So you get home from a busy day at work, or decide to go to House Group after a hard day of looking after the kids, and you want a word from the Lord to encourage you or challenge you or to keep you going. You want to see Christ and love him more. So you get to house group – and we're studying Esther. And it doesn't seem to be a book that does any of those things.

For a start, as most people know, it is a book that does not mention God, by any of his names. It's not simply that Jesus Christ seems to be absent – either by prophecy or expectation. Esther seems to be Godless. None of the characters mention him, or even seem to relate to him. It's odd.

Also, the story, as exciting as it is raises all sorts of questions. The bad guys are really bad, but the good guys, the characters we are supposed to relate to are not really good. They do questionable things.

Mordacai encourages Esther to join the king's harem – with all that that entails. He tells her to keep her background quiet. What should we make of that?

Then there is the conclusion to the book. We are relieved things turn around for Esther – but it moves very quickly from a humorous satire to a Quentin Tarantino violent epic in the last couple of chapters. Perhaps we think it underlines the concerns some people have with the Old Testament – violent and nasty.

And then when we get to the conclusion, the reason why the book seems to have been written in the first place it just feels irrelevant. We don't celebrate Purim. So why do we need to know this story? So at first reading Esther produces a mix of responses in us.

When we put all things together we see that Esther poses a particular challenge for Bible study. The usual questions we ask of a Bible passage when we study it don't work. I don't know if you're used to asking particular questions of a Bible passage to help you study it? Questions like "what do you learn about God?" "what do we learn about human beings?" "Is there a command for me to obey, a promise to believe, a sin to repent of?" They are all good questions. But if we ask them of Esther we may end up in a pagan king's bedroom and clueless about God.

So why bother studying it?

THE CONTEXT OF ESTHER

The first thing we need to do when we come to Esther is to take a huge step back.

I've never fought in a war, thankfully. The nearest I've got to was paintballing, and that was bad enough. Imagine you're fighting in World War 2. You are part of the allies but fighting miles away from home. Perhaps you're fighting in Asia. And the battle is tough, it's exhausting. Your life is threatened every day. And I'm sure those people who fought so bravely were tempted to wonder "what am I doing here?". What has me fighting them got to do with the big scheme of things? And the answer would be – a whole lot. Each individual battle was

part of the wider conflict of the Allies against the Axis headed by Nazi Germany.

What we need to remember about Esther is that it is an individual conflict which is part of the great cosmic conflict that the Bible tells us about. Just flick back to Genesis 3:14-15

READ Gen 3:14-15

We all know the story. Adam has fallen, but in the midst of that God promises to reverse the fall by sending a Messiah. But as he gives that promise there is the hint that the story of the human race will be a battle, a war, between the seed of Satan and the seed of the woman.

And that's what we see in the whole of the Bible don't we? Satan trying to get rid of God's promise. The Israelites go into slavery in Egypt. They are sent into exile. In Big and small events in the Old Testament you can see Satan's hand in desperately trying to bring the promise of God to nothing, to try and snuff it out.

Once we see that we see the enormous significance of what's going on in Esther 3. This is not just one little man misusing his power. It's not simply a threat of genocide, as horrendous as that is. It's the threat of wiping out the people of God and the promise of God. It's the threat of wiping out the Messiah. Notice – this edict was to be put into effect in all the Kings provinces. If it succeeds the Israelites who have gone back to Jerusalem will be just as under threat as those still in Persia. What happens in Esther matters in the scope of the whole Bible and the whole of God's promises.

But the fact is – Satan can't succeed. God will be faithful to his promises and is powerful to do it. At the lowest points, the light keeps shining. God's promise is like one of those "magic" candles you put on children's birthday cakes which can look like it's been blown out but comes back again. Esther is one of those lowest points.

Now this is where the World War 2 analogy breaks down. For the soldier fighting out in Japan for the allies victory was not certain, but it is with the Lord and in the Bible we see the victory worked out.

But the other key for reading Esther is seeing and understanding how our God works. There is a story told of a preacher who chose to preach from the book of Esther one Sunday, and read the whole of it in the service, then paused and said “that was lucky” and sat down. I’ve no idea if that story is true or not. But it makes the point.

Once we see the cosmic significance of what’s going on you’ve got to say it is incredibly lucky Esther was in the Kings harem to be able to speak up and save the day. It was incredibly lucky that Mordecai overheard the story of the plot to the king. It was incredibly lucky that the King couldn’t speak one night so asked to read through the record of his reign and read about Mordecai.

Was it lucky? No. The absence of God’s name is deliberate by the author. He’s there – it’s not lucky! He’s at work. But he’s at work silently, behind the scenes. We experience the book of Esther in the way Mordecai and Esther did – we feel the tension and the relief but we look back and see God at work.

Esther teaches by illustration the great doctrine of Providence. I think part of the reason we get so hung up on guidance these days is that we’ve lost teaching on providence. What is providence? Listen to how the Westminster Confession of Faith (our statement of faith) describes it –

God—the great Creator of all things—upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least. He exercises this most wise and holy providence according to his infallible foreknowledge and the free and unchangeable counsel of his own will, to the praise of the glory of his wisdom, power, justice, goodness, and mercy.

There are 2 parts to providence. The first is God’s general providence, by which he is in control of all things. The kind of providence we read about in the proverbs, where even lots of controlled by God.

The second part is his special providence by which he is fulfilling his particular purpose to glorify his Son and save a people for himself. And both come together in Esther. It is lucky all these things happened – lucky because God is in control.

Yet he's working quietly. That's what we see in Esther. I don't know who your favourite hero is in films or TV?

Perhaps you like Superman – he swoops in when there is a crisis. A girl is falling from a building, then superman turns up and catches her just before she hits the ground. And there are crowds watching aren't there. No one could miss superman at work. And sometimes God's actions are like that. The exodus. The great public miracles.

But God's work is not always like that. He doesn't always draw attention to himself – sometimes his work can be dismissed as luck by those who don't want to see. I used to love Dr Who as a kid – it's not as good now though!

Some of the best Dr Who stories were where he turned up and worked behind the scenes to solve a problem and slipped away (showing he was responsible for the great fire of London to prevent an alien invasion or something like that).

WHERE IS GOD IN ESTHER?

So this answers the question "where is God in Esther"? He is where he always is.

Fulfilling his promises and purposes – To bring the Lord Jesus Christ, his Messiah into the world, to glorify him through his death and resurrection rescuing his people.

By protecting his people – He is building his church. Because that's who the Jews are in the Old Testament. We have a continuity with them. Their deliverances are our deliverances.

We rejoice as we look to the past and see what God has done. "Those who bless you I will bless, those who curse you I will curse".

Working through flawed sinful human beings. How does God work? He uses his people. He uses Esther and Mordecai.

Now, notice he is not dependent on them. The great statement of faith in the book comes from Mordecai at the end of chapter 4 and it is brilliant. It is real trust in God's promises. It shows Mordecai's faith. Read 4:16-17. Because

Mordecai knows the promises and purposes of God don't stand or fall with Esther. He does not believe if Esther fails then there will be no Jesus.

But God calls us to be faithful to him and then he uses us in his plans. We see that in the great commission – the mission of the church don't we? God will rescue his people without you. He doesn't need you. But he uses you. He calls you to be faithful to him. Who knows? God may have put you in your office, in your family for such a time as this to play a part in his great work.

And he works often silently and secretly. If you were a Jew who had returned to Jerusalem you would not have a clue that this was going on – how close you came to being the victim of this genocide, and how close the promises you were clinging on to came to being extinguished. But through God's providential work you had been saved.

But God is also present in Esther in a place we shouldn't miss, but might miss. Who wrote the book of Esther? We don't know the human author. And in a sense it doesn't matter. Because we do know that God wrote the book of Esther. It is God's word. So the way it is written is important. The fact it is written is important. Spend time as you work through the book noticing how the story is written. It's especially noticeable in chapter 1.

King Xerxes is the most powerful man in the known world – yet he's being mocked by the writer isn't he? The repetition, the lists of all he owns, the description of the excess, and the fact he has to pass a law to get his wife to respect him. It's funny. But it's Psalm 2 "funny" isn't it? The God of heaven laughs at the kings of this world. See if you agree as you read it in your groups.

THE COMFORT OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

So just to conclude, I hope we'll see as we go through Esther that it is a comforting, encouraging book which should leave us worshipping our God. We'll see that God is sovereign, that he is in control. That he is "nowhere mentioned but everywhere present" as a preacher I recently listened to described him.

That that is particularly true when he seems to be absent. And this is why Esther is so relevant today. Will God be mentioned in your work tomorrow? In

your school? Perhaps even in your home? Except as a swear word? Does that mean he is not there?

Does it look like God's purposes are being fulfilled today? Not really. Churches are small. Atheists are vocal. Christians are persecuted around the world. In many ways the church of Christ looks like it's on the verge of being snuffed out. Do we have hope? The book of Esther shows we can, that God is relentlessly fulfilling his purposes and glorifying his son and the gates of hell won't stand against building his church. The cosmic struggle is still going on – even though we know the devil is certainly defeated.

Are our lives messy? Are we perfect people who always make the right choices and always end up in places in our lives that are ideal? Can God use us if we are in those places? Esther says yes, even though his purposes are not dependent on us.

But most of all, as we go through Esther we should do so with the intention to praise him. The application point of Esther is worship and awe. This is our God. This is how he has acted and will act. Take Esther slowly and savour his workmanship. Because it is a picture of his great work through Christ – where all his enemies were defeated, where the tables were turned, where one greater than Mordecai worked for the good of his people. The book of Esther strengthens our confidence in the fulfilment of his remaining promises.