

world. It causes us to unintentionally see people as pawns rather than created in the image of God.

- Have you ever had a frustrating moment where you realized, “I can’t have what I want?” What was it like?
- In what ways do you see “I want more” rearing its head in your life? How do you combat it?
- How are the relationships in your life reflecting their value as those created in the image of God rather than pawns to help you advance/win?
- How has your fast affected the way you interact with the LORD?

THURSDAY: PLANS

Read: Esther 5 & 6

There is a popular phrase used to describe all preparations that fail- “The best laid plan of mice and men often go awry.” It is actually adapted from a poem written in 1785 by a man named Robert Burns. It is worded a little differently but the point is the same. We can work our hardest and things not turn out the way we hoped or intended.

In these two chapters of the book of Esther, we see two very distinct plans that have different goals altogether. Esther plans to meet with her husband and ask for him to not kill her people. Haman plans to kill Mordecai and, eventually, all of the Jews. When I read in chapter 4 of Esther’s great risk, I can feel the fear that she had because I feel the same thing. When I consider the selfish plan of Haman, it reminds me of the wickedness of my own heart that (at times) wants to see the demise of others so that I will be viewed in a better light. In Esther 5 and 6, both are planning-one is selfless, the other is selfish. Each had a goal in mind. Esther risked everything hoping her people would be rescued; Haman haughtily attempted to wipe out those same people. For Esther, her plan came from a different place-Mordecai (ultimately, God’s providence). Haman’s wicked plan came from within his wicked heart.

What do you think of your own planning? If we are being completely honest, I believe all of us see the gray in our own plans. There are moments for us when what God says seems not to matter. You do not have to be actively persecuting your neighbors to be committing the sin of overlooking the very needs God has put in front of you.

The Scriptures offer clarity as to God’s ultimate plan for us in this life as believers. His outside plan is for us to make disciples-even if that is at great risk. John Piper says that “Every opportunity God puts before us is a call to faith in the promised strength of God.” God’s greatest promise to His people is that He is with us (that is actually what we celebrate at Christmas-God with Us). God has not asked anything of us that He has not equipped us to do. As we trust Him, He reminds us that He has provided all of the strength to obey His commands.

- In the way you are caring for your neighbors, does it seem like the plan is coming from the inside or the outside?
- Would you say you live a life aligned with the design of God? Why?
- Why should we humble ourselves before the LORD?
- Haman had a huge desire for glory. If God turned you over to your your sinful pursuits completely, what do you think would destroy you?

FRIDAY: ENEMIES

Read: Esther 6

Every great hero has an equally compelling villain. When we read the story of Luke Skywalker, there is Darth Vader (and-ultimately-the emperor). Batman has the Joker. Harry has Voldermort. When Japan told the story of King Kong vs. Godzilla, Godzilla was their hero. Conversely, Americans told the story with Kong as the good guy. Perspective definitely matters.

Mordecai definitely had an enemy in Haman. And Mordecai was outmatched. Haman had the entire power of the kingdom at his disposal and had a desire to wipe out not only Mordecai but all of the people of Mordecai’s race. This wasn’t even personal. It dated back years to the time of Saul and Agag (the writer reminds us of this feud when he intentionally calls Haman an Agagite). In the most wicked way possible, Haman had planned to put Mordecai to death and execute the Jews...but Xerxes just so happened to have a dream.

In the dream, he remembers that Mordecai rescues him. He then has a conversation with his ‘right hand man’ (Haman) and asks him how he believes the king should honor someone. Haman, believing that person to be himself, offers up an over-the-top elaborate celebration. Think about this: reminded by a dream, Xerxes does what Haman would never have dreamed. He exalts Mordecai as a hero.

This is not happenstance. God has done what only He was able to do. To borrow words from David in Psalm 42, The LORD exalts Mordecai by making his enemy a footstool. In line with the story of Joseph, at the end of his waiting, Mordecai is celebrated like He is royalty. God using Mordecai’s enemy to exalt Mordecai to the place of highest honor.

It would benefit us greatly to never forget the heavy gospel imagery of this story that does not even mention God. In our own power, we are not God’s people yet he clothes us with righteousness and calls us sons and daughters. He does so through the humility of His most noble servant-His Son-meeting us with crowns, rings, and robes. Apart from Jesus, Paul says we are ‘enemies of the Cross of Christ’, hostile enemies of God because of our evil behavior”, and “objects of wrath.” In Christ, God has stooped down and honored those who were once Yet we have done nothing to deserve any of this.

- What does it mean for you that you were ‘an enemy of God’?
- Are there people in your life that you view as an enemy? In what ways are you serving them?
- We have encouraged you fast from something (food, social media, etc.) for four days. How do you believe the LORD has shaped your heart during this time?

SATURDAY: READ & PRAY

Read Esther 7 & 8 to prepare for our gathering tomorrow.

1. Pray for Chad as he prepares to preach God’s Word.
2. Ask God to prepare your heart to hear and obey His Word.



MONDAY: PREPARATION

Read: Esther 4

Let's start this week with a strange question: Have you ever fasted?

In 2019, 'fasting' is a term being used by multiple diet companies as a way to achieve a goal weight. However, when we look into the pages of Scripture, we see fasting mentioned a lot and it has a spiritual component. We fast to prepare ourselves to be part of what God is doing.

When I was working on my master's degree, a friend and I both had major decisions in front of us. He was dealing with graduation and finding a job. I was processing a situation with my family. We agreed to fast from eating for a set amount of time and committed to pray for one another and hold each other accountable. We broke our fast on the same day. He finished by eating a plate of spaghetti and meatballs at a girlfriend's house while I closed my time with a double cheeseburger from Sonic. Obviously, neither of us had investigated the proper way to close out a fast or the negative impact of ending one in the wrong way. We still laugh about our ignorance (and discomfort).

To prepare ourselves for Esther 5 and 6, we need to reconsider what we are taught in Esther 4 about how Esther prepared to meet with the king. She committed to fasting. She asked her servants to do the same. She sent word to Mordecai that he should ask this of all of the Jewish people in Susa. Full disclosure: We know prayer is never mentioned in this passage in Esther. When we consider Esther's fast, we are assuming that time was spent in prayer as well. However, there is not another example of fasting taking place apart from interaction with God. The idea that one would fast apart from prayer is hard to fathom-that is just called 'not eating'.

When we fast, the purpose is to step away from all of life's distractions and focus on a situation with God's Word and guidance in mind. Fasting helps us to avoid things that interfere with prayer. In so doing, fasting changes our hearts and mind. One writer says it this way, "Fasting does not change God's hearing so much as it changes our praying."

When the Bible talks about fasting, it is referencing food. In a world where food was not a given and absolutely necessary for survival, it makes sense. However, the point is not what you give up-it is that you give something up to focus on the Lord.

What are the common distractions in your own life?

As we continue to think of the "NOW" God is calling each of us to, what are some things causing distractions in your life? Fasting is mentioned numerous times in the Scriptures and it seems like God expects his people to do so. Think about the way Jesus talks about fasting. He does not say, "If you fast." He says, "When you fast." Our God wants His people to want Him-even at the exclusion of seemingly good things.

What do you value and crave so much that you may need to step away from it to focus prayer on your lost neighbors and co-workers? It does not have to be completely giving up meals. What if you gave up your Diet Dr. Pepper and, every time you crave it, you are reminded to pray for the person across the street? Or every time you wanted to check your Facebook to post a cat meme or recipe, you decided to ask the Lord to meet the spiritual and physical needs of a friend?

Fasting is a great way to focus your prayers on the God who answers

them and the people who need them.

As this week begins, I encourage us to fill in these blanks in order for us to desire for our lives what God does.

When considering anything difficult, how many things do you attempt to do to fix your situation before you pray?

Who are the people that pray and fast with you about situations?

For the next two weeks, every time I want to _____, I am going to spend time praying for _____.

Let's pray that God will give us his heart for the people in our sphere of influence. When we fast from anything for our friends, we are reminded that our confidence is not in ourselves but the Lord of Hosts.

TUESDAY: POSSESSIONS

Read: Esther 5

Everybody has a 'thing'. For some, it is money. For others-guns. Some of us need to have every gadget one can possibly attain. For me, it is sneakers.

I've loved tennis shoes since I was a kid. I was a child during the rise of Michael Jordan and the establishment of Nike's dominance over other sneaker brands. I remember asking for certain sneakers for Christmas as my 'big' gift. Sneakers were part of many of my childhood interactions with other kids. My older boys could even be little 'sneakerheads' if I don't keep an eye on it.

As Queen, Esther did not just have 'a thing'-Esther literally had everything. She was obviously beautiful and was given the best treatments of her day to accentuate that beauty. She was chosen to be the wife of the king and had all of the creature comforts of Persia (including a couch made of gold!). She had numerous servants at her disposal. She could have whatever her heart desired. However, the issue with Haman's law meant that, in order for her to do the right thing, she must risk all of that...and possibly her life. As bravely as possible, she puts on her royal gown after fasting and prayer and goes into the throne room to meet with her husband.

In the gospels, Jesus meets with a young man who has everything. He is 'rich'. He is 'young'. He is a 'ruler.' He comes to Jesus and asks, "Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks him about the law and this 'rich young ruler' tells Jesus that he has kept all of these since He is a boy. Jesus replies, "One thing you lack. Take all you have and give it to the poor-then follow me." As you know, the young man walked away sad because he had great wealth. (Lk. 18:18-23)

The contrast of situations is noteworthy. One person with everything risks being killed because wealth is not everything and the other walks away sad because his wealth will not allow him to follow Jesus. One theologian puts it this way. By choosing to fast, Esther shows us what she 'does not put her trust in beauty. Our blessings can become our burden when they mean more to us than the God who gave the gifts. The problem for the young man was not having stuff. It was that his stuff had him. Esther knew how the King dealt with those who disobeyed-he

literally took everything that belonged to his first wife-including her roof-away. Yet to undo the damage of Haman's order, she had to risk losing all of her things for the Jewish people to survive. For those of us in relationship with God through Jesus, our things cannot become so cumbersome that they cause us to miss the opportunity to make Him known as the eternal hope of the world. When we see Esther choose to fast over her situation, we are seeing that her trust is not in her money or beauty or smarts. If anything, fasting would impact her physical appearance negatively. It is in something (Someone) far greater. Can the same be said for you?

- What are the things in your life that you value?
- What risks do you take when you lay things aside in order to follow Jesus? What are your things that hold you back?
- Have you spent time praying and fasting today?

WEDNESDAY: SIN

Read: Esther 5:9-15

When someone is on a diet, there are few things that they look forward to more than a 'cheat day'. (Sadly, health care professionals don't love cheat days. I talked to an exercise guru once and he asked, "Do you cheat on your wife?" To which I replied, "No...but I don't buy my cheeseburgers flowers.") When you choose to restrict your intake of whatever, the opportunity to enjoy that thing once after three weeks is glorious. Years ago, I was driving through McDonald's after two weeks of lettuce, grilled chicken, and artichoke hearts. All that I wanted was a Chicken McNugget drenched in BBQ sauce (with fries...supersized).

I ordered and heard, "We are all out of McNuggets. However, feel free to order ANYTHING else on our menu." I could have anything I wanted-except the one thing I wanted.

In Esther 5, Haman is on top of the world. He was wealthy and had many sons (understood to be the blessing of the gods). He had the highest rank in all of the kingdom. He was on his way home from being served by the King and Queen and was invited to another feast the next day. Wherever he went, everyone bowed-with one exception. Mordecai would not bow to him. Haman said, "Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." He had all that he wanted-except this one person who refused to bow. Haman had all that he wanted-except the one thing he wanted.

However, it does remind us of what sin is. In the garden, Adam and Eve were told they could have whatever they wanted-except one tree. That is the tree that mattered. They had everything they could ever want-except what the wanted.

Ed Welch defines sin as, "I want...and I want more." This is far from Haman's only sin. After all, he wanted to murder an entire race of people. However, we are given a window into his soul and ours when we look and see that he wanted the one thing he didn't have. Unchecked, this causes him to construct a plan to put Mordecai to death.

When we don't realize the potential damage of "I want", there is no end to the damage it can do. It will affect the way we see our place in the