



FOR SUCH A TIME AS

NOW

A Devotional in Esther

MON: IMPERFECT PEOPLE, PERFECT GOD

Read: Esther 1 & 2

Over the years, the book of Esther has been problematic for scholars and Bible students for numerous reasons. First and foremost, the book never mentions the name of God-there is no reference to Yahweh anywhere. There is also no mention of a Messiah (or a need for one). Neither prayer nor sin is ever mentioned. The closest thing we have to religion of any sort is a Feast that we hope involves prayer (it *definitely* involved a party). Furthermore, the Jewish people had been released from their Babylonian captivity by the new Persian government. They were free to return home - yet our entire story is about the Jewish people who stayed (probably for the comfort that Persia provided). Mordecai has taken a Persian name. Esther is as well. It is the story of a people disconnected from their God and faith altogether.

In many ways, the story we find in Esther lacks the courage and heroism of so many of the Bible's champions. David obviously stood as Israel's champion before the Philistines. In the stories of Esther's contemporaries, Daniel refused to eat the Babylonian king's food. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were thrown into the fiery furnace for not bowing down to the statue representing Babylonian deity. Later, Daniel was thrown into the lion's den for not following the king's edict about only worshipping him.

Esther is none of these stories. Esther spoke the Persian language; no one would know she was Jewish. Though we know the story of Esther is about survival, it also includes power, glory, and influence. She was instructed to keep her real identity a secret. We are much like Mordecai - hoping to get the smallest amount of power and save our hides. We aren't Daniel. We are Esther - and not the Veggie Tale, green onion Esther. We have the spoils of our kingdom at our disposal; there is under-lying selfish gain in so many of our decisions. The short comings and failings of Esther and her Uncle are not far removed from our own issues. Why did Mordecai obey the king's decree? Why did Esther join the harem? Why did either of them care about power and acceptance in the land of Persia? The book of Esther tells us the story of compromised people who are more like us than we really like to admit.

In spite of all of this, the story of Esther gives us hope. In God's good design, he lets us see the whole of this story. A moment will arise when Mordecai sees the fate of the Jewish people is at stake. His powerful niece shares a bed with the only man who can stop it. In spite of all of each of his and her past shortcomings and present fears, they step into the providential plan of a God whose name we do not even see, yet is obviously there. Hopefully, we will see our past and present in the same way.

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1. What in your past or present causes you to disqualify yourself from stepping into God's current call on your life?
 2. What current fears do you have that keep you from interacting with your neighbors for the sake of Jesus?
 3. How do you think God may use these things?



TUE: CONTRASTING CROWNS

Read: Esther 1:1-12

One of the biggest movies of the summer of 2019 is "The Lion King." It is a 'photorealistic computer animated remake'(read: they don't look like cartoons) of the 1994 classic. The filmmakers tell us that the story is an amalgamation of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet' and the Biblical stories of Joseph and Moses. In short, a king returns to take his rightful place as the sovereign ruler over an entire kingdom.

"King" is a pretty foreign concept for us as Americans. We don't have one. Unlike so many other nations globally, we have never had one. The closest thing that we have to royalty here would be celebrities or athletes - both of which compete for the affection of the public with their peers and each other. In short, we are free to pledge our loyalty to whomever we please - and take it away at a whim.

As we read through the Bible, Kings are the norm. All of the nations had a version of a king. In his day, Xerxes was the King of Persia (the name 'Ahasuerus' is actually a title like 'King' or 'Caesar'- though the word looks like a type of dinosaur). He throws a six month party to get people invested in his Kingdom and military exploits. As the party is coming to a close, Xerxes is...merry with wine (read:hammered) and orders his eunuchs to make his wife Vashti leave her party and join him at his. Lots of commentaries believe he wanted to make a display of her - having her carried in with nothing on but her crown. When she says 'no', his men urge him to banish her from the Kingdom. When the wine wears off, Xerxes has made a decision that has long-lasting consequences.

This is the first bad decision we see made by a seemingly sovereign, yet easily manipulated, king. When we look at Him alongside our 'King of Kings', we see so many differences. Xerxes sees his subjects as possessions to be used; Jesus sees us as people to be loved. Xerxes wants his people to crumble and cower to His every whim; Jesus wants that we love and cherish Him and so that his desires become our very own. Xerxes throws a party to get people on his side; Jesus throws an eternal party for those who are his. In a fit of rage, Xerxes strips his wife of everything including her crown and banishes her. In a display of joy, Jesus dresses us in righteousness, putting a ring on our finger and welcomes us. These are just a few of the ways we see how much better our King of Kings is than Persia's 'king of kings'.

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1. How are you responding to our King of Kings?
 2. Do we believe Jesus is manipulating us or are we spending time with Him so that we see His will as something that we want to be part of?



WED: INFLUENCE

Read: Esther 1:13-22

I am a sucker for a movie trailer. I am baffled by the fact that it takes three minutes to get me to commit two hours to a movie. If the dialogue is witty or the special effects are polished, I will sit down with a bucket of popcorn, peanut butter M&M's, and Coke Zero as soon as I get a window of opportunity. However, the most important influence in my life when it comes to movies is the approval of my friends. If they love it, I am there. If they don't, I will strongly consider staying away.

As we read through Esther, we influence is everywhere- both good and bad. The King is influenced by his advisors to banish Vashti-in effect, killing her. He is also influenced by Haman to issue a law killing the Jewish people. Mordecai is affected by the political leaders-taking a Persian name and spending time in the the Citadel. Esther is influenced by Mordecai when he puts her in a position to become the next queen. Ultimately she is influenced by him when he sees Haman's wickedness and something has to be done.

Our friends influence us more than we know. Think about the words of Jesus regarding friendship in John 15 when he says, "Greater love has no one than this than to lay down his life for a friend." In John 13, Jesus goes even further when he tells us, "They will know you are my disciples when you love one another." In no way is this an exhaustive list. Jesus constantly talks about the importance of relationships with those who share your beliefs and with those who don't. In His final words before the ascension, Jesus says, "As you go, make disciples of all nations." All of our influence-near and far-provides us the chance to see the world influenced by the good news of Jesus.

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1. What are the things that influence you the most?
 2. How are you wielding your influence in the lives of believers?
 3. How are you investing in the lives of people who don't trust Jesus?



THU: PLANS & PROVIDENCE

Read: Esther 2:1-18

ABC's "The Bachelor," along with all of its subsequent spin-offs, is a bona fide hot mess. It has run since 2002. For perspective, the original suitor will turn 49 this year. We are almost at the point where he could receive an AARP discount on his luxurious destination dates. In the show, a man or woman (The Bachelorette) is presented with multiple potential suitors in hopes of them spending the rest of their lives together. In case you haven't watched, this rarely *actually* happens. Only six of the 23 couples are still together.

It is easy to compare Xerxes' wife search with this or a movie about princesses. However, it is much more wicked. Xerxes' people sent out a letter having young maidens gathered from around the empire. The women received six months of training, spices, and make-up and were scheduled to meet with Xerxes and attempt to please him. If you were not declared the winner, you were sent to live alone and husbandless in a house with the other losing contestants. This was the highest of stakes.

If you are Esther (or any other contestant), this is a terrible, no-win situation. When coupled with the fate of Vashti, this is a disaster. If you are Jewish, taken away from your personal customs and probably mocked and scorned for your God's ineptitude, this is a catastrophic, winless situation. How can the God of Israel really be all of the things the Torah says he is and this happen to you?

In essence, Jesus was asked "Where is God?" and "How can God let this happen?" from time to time. Jesus replied by telling us that God "makes the rain fall on the evil and the good." (Matt. 5:45) Paul expresses a similar sentiment when he tells us that "God makes all things work together for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose." (Rom. 8:29) Our God takes situations that are in no way good and plans that are obviously imperfect and turns them for the good of His people.

Our greatest example of this is on the cross of Jesus. God takes the sins of humanity that damn us and puts them on a human being - His Son. Christ is faced with an

impossible situation and even prays, "Let this cup pass from me." (Matt. 26:39) God takes man's cruelest torture device - a Roman cross - and deals with sin of the humanity that created it. The Romans were hoping to squelch earthly rebellion but, in so doing, brought to fruition God's heavenly, righteous rebellion. What men wanted to use for their own desires God actually weaves into a display of His good hope for the world.

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1. Can you remember a time in your life that you wondered where God was, only to look back and see His hand in your situation?
 2. How does that help you when you experience trials now?
 3. Take a moment to give God thanks for His providential care for you.



FRI: FORGOTTEN

Read: Esther 2:19-23

Comparison steals our joy. Sadly, I am prone to it. In my 15 years traveling, speaking, and pastoring, I have found myself in multiple situations where I looked at the status of those around me and was envious of their popularity in the eyes of onlookers.

At a former church, the senior pastor was revered. One peer is one of the most recognized pastors in the state of Texas. Another acquaintance from years ago is a best-selling author who is recognized globally. Don't get me wrong, I love what God has called me to do and am honored to have the opportunities he has given me. Yet, left to my own devices and doubts, it is easy to feel overlooked and forgotten, and there are few things worse than being forgotten.

My parents threw my 7th birthday party at Showbiz Pizza (the forerunner to Chuck E. Cheese). We invited the whole class. However, my birthday party was held on a Thursday. One kid showed up. When I went to school the next day, it was hard to ignore that all of my friends

were either too busy to celebrate with me or, worse, they didn't care enough to remember.

In Esther 2, two of Xerxes' eunuchs wanted him dead and plotted to kill him. When he overheard the plan, Mordecai reported it to Esther, thereby saving the King's life. In the entirety of the Bible, we see people elevated to places of prominence for less regularly. However, Mordecai receives no blessing from the sovereign. He goes right back to his life on the city gates.

Have you ever thought life was unfair? Has there ever been a time when it seemed like you would receive the recognition, reward, or promotion based on your merit and attention to detail only for it not to be received? Has it ever seemed as if God has forgotten about you, leaving you to ask, "Why is this happening to me?"

In John's Gospel, we see Jesus go to the pool of Bethesda. Every year, an angel stirred the water and whichever sick person got to the water first was healed. Blind, deaf, and lame people were everywhere - along with people with a variety of other ailments. Jesus meets with a man who had been unable to walk for 38 years! Jesus tells him to take up his mat and go.

What if you are there waiting to be healed? You see Jesus heal him. You see someone else get to the water first. You are overlooked and forgotten...again.

We see people who feel forgotten all over the Bible. Job felt that way when Satan was torturing him. David asked, "Why have you forgotten me?" Elijah wants to go into a cave and die. In the lives of so many of the champions of the Bible, we see glimpses of being alone and forgotten.

These difficult times will come. When they do, a friend points out we can take a few different approaches:

- A. **Life isn't fair, and God doesn't care.** In this, bitterness takes root and not only affects us it affects all of the people we love.
- B. **"If I was just walking closer to the Lord this wouldn't happen. He's punishing me for not praying or doing enough."** This is a lie from Satan that robs us of joy and places the power of God on our own actions.

C. "I'm going to choose to trust that God cares about me, that He hasn't given up, that I can't see the whole picture from here...but God can."

God wants us to live a joyous life through faith - and faith is trusting God's unseen hand in the worst moments. The story of our struggles is not lost on our God. Remember the words of Jesus: God cares for birds and for flowers...of course He cares about us!

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1. When is a time that you felt forgotten?
 2. What are ways that you can deal with feeling as if God has forgotten you?



SAT: READ & PRAY

Read Esther 3 & 4 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.
3. Pray that God would use the gathering of the church to encourage the saints and call the lost to repent and believe.
4. Pray for our worship team as they prepare to lead us.

