

Men and Women of God – Esther

Worship: Today I choose (preferred) or Be bold, be strong for the Lord your God is with you or Unless you build this house (its easy to desire what other have...)

Big Picture: Like Ruth, another woman with character who made a difference – who stepped up to be counted.

Esther unique in that in the original version no name, title or pronoun for God appears in the book but the hand of God is so clear throughout. (more later). Esther is also a great example of the interplay between God's intentions and human choice. (See Jeremiah 18 v 7-10)

Esther (also called Hadassah Est 2 v 7)

Name: Esther

Father: Abihail (Est 2 v 15). Adopted Father and Cousin: Mordecai (Est 2 v 7 and v 15)

Husband: King Xerxes

Background

(Period of Time in Egypt 430 yrs) Moses born C1526BC, 40yrs as prince, 40yrs in desert, 40yrs leading the Hebrews, **(Period of Time in Wilderness 40 yrs) Joshua** – military failure – incomplete conquest of land - then **Period of Judges** starts in c1375BC, (Tutankhamen dies 1358BC, destruction of Troy during Trojan War BC1183) - 13 Judges ending with Samuel, 6 periods of oppression and deliverance **(Period of Time of Judges 325 yrs)** Saul becomes Israel's first King cBC1050 **(Start of the Period of Kings)**, then David, then Solomon.

The Divided Kingdom of Israel

Solomon becomes king – kingdom splits in two Northern kingdom 10 tribes, Southern Kingdom 2 tribes

Reason: 1 Kings 11 v 28-40

Rehoboam (Solomon's son becomes king of the southern kingdom – Judah) and **Jeroboam** (one of Solomon's officials in charge of the labour force of the tribe of Joseph) becomes king of the northern kingdom (Israel).

N.B The priests and levities all went to the southern kingdom at this time **2 Chron 11 v 13,14** 'The priests and Levites from all their districts throughout Israel sided with him (Rehoboam). The Levites even abandoned their pasture lands and property, and came to Judah and Jerusalem because Jeroboam and his sons had rejected them as priests of the Lord.' 2 Chron 11 v 16,17 'Those from every tribe of Israel who set their hearts on seeking the Lord, the God of Israel, followed the Levites to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices to the Lord, the God of their fathers. They strengthened the kingdom of Judah and

supported Rehoboam son of Solomon for three years, walking in the ways of David and Solomon during this time.'

Captivity

Both kingdoms taken into captivity (Reason: in both cases sinful rejection of God's call to holiness) Israel: 2 Kings Ch 17 v 5 – 23, Judah: Jeremiah Ch 25 v 4-11

Kings and Chronicles tells of life and times of the kings of both kingdoms up until the northern kingdom was taken into captivity by Shalmaneser the Assyrian in 722BC (resettled foreigners in the land – 2 Kings 17 v 24) so people were mixed – this mix of people became known as the Samaritans. The southern kingdom was taken into captivity by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian in 586BC. Confusingly, Judah and people from Judah, become synonymous with Israel and Israelites.

The Babylonians were defeated by the Medes/Persians 539BC and as prophesied, (Isaiah 44 v 28), the Persian king Cyrus let the some of the exiles return and in 516BC, 70 years after being taken into captivity the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt under the leadership of Zerubbabel. The story of Esther begins in 483BC, 25 years before Ezra led the second group of exiles back to Jerusalem (Ezra 7). Jerusalem's wall was rebuilt under the leadership of Nehemiah in 445BC. Malachi, the prophet who wrote the last book in the Bible started his ministry c430BC.

Xerxes the Great was Persia's fifth king (486BC to 465BC). His winter place was Susa, where he held the banquet described in Est Ch 1 v 3-7. Persian kings often held great banquets before going to war. In 481BC Xerxes launched an attack against Greece. After his fleet won a great victory at Thermopylae, he was defeated at Salamis in 480BC and had to return to Persia. Esther became queen in 479BC.

VAK Moment. Joke:

Sam was ready to tee off this gorgeous Sunday morning and looked up to the sky and said, "Please God, tell me there's a golf course in Heaven.

The skies opened up and a deep voice proclaimed, "Sam, I have some good news and some bad news".

"So, what's the good news?", asked Sammy.

"Sam, we have the most magnificent golf courses in Heaven. Plush, green fairways. Greens as smooth as silk. Never a wait on the first tee. Never a rainy day."

Sammy replies, "That's fantastic! What could possibly be so bad?"

"You tee off tomorrow morning at 9:00 AM"

(Actually there is a lot in this joke that you could discuss, in fact it would almost form the basis of a bible study itself. It would probably be entitled ‘Is dying bad news?’)

Bible Study

Providence or co-incidence?

Discuss the following (Leave Esther becomes Queen until last): Don’t feel that each event is necessarily providential. Discuss each point and then talk about whether collectively they speak of providence or co-incidence.

Providence – God divinely intervenes, God inspires circumstances or situations, Co-incidence – a remarkable concurrence of events or circumstances without an apparent cause relating them. (Providence is sometimes called God-incidence)

- Queen Vashti disobeys the king (Est 1 v12)
- Mordecai overhears a plot to kill the king (Est 2 v 21,22)
- Haman casts lots to decide the best day to carry out the decree to destroy the Jews. (Est 3 v 7). (Haman cast the pur – the lot – and because of the later victory of the Jews over their enemies on the very day they were going to be destroyed, the date that came from the casting of the pur later became the annual celebration of Purim which is still celebrated by Jews today (purim being the Persian word for lots). Purim is characterized by public recitation of the Scroll of Esther additions to the prayers and the grace after meals, giving mutual gifts of food and drink, giving charity to the poor and a celebratory meal. Other customs include drinking wine, wearing of masks and costumes, and public celebration
- King Xerxes twice extends his sceptre (Est 5 v 2 and Est 8 v 4)
- King Xerxes cannot sleep (Est 6 v 1)
- The Jews destroy their enemies (Est 9 v 2 and v 5)

It is also worth looking at a verse in Ruth when looking at providence or co-incidence: Ruth 2 v 3 ‘So she (Ruth) went out and began to glean in the fields behind the harvesters. **As it turned out (co-incidence or providence)**, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelech.’

- Now look at Esther becomes queen. (Est 2 v 17)

Esther Becomes queen

One of Esther’s natural gifts was beauty. Esther ‘was lovely in form and features’ (Est 2 v 7, Est 2 v 20)

- If we were to ask our friends, family what our natural gifts were what would they say? Write a list. You might ask the members of the group to contribute things that they see as natural gifts in other group members if they are not mentioned.
- In what ways do we sometimes not appreciate the gifts we have or which that we had someone else's?
- To what extent does not appreciating our natural gifts or wishing that we had someone else's show that we are not rejoicing in the way that God has made us?
- How can we rejoice more in the way that God has made us?
- How might rejoicing in that give us more confidence?

Esther faces a choice

The pivotal moment: Mordecai learns of Haman's plot to destroy the Jews and asks Esther to help. Est 4 v 14 '**... for such as time as this**' You might like to remind everyone of the series of meeting that we did together at St Mary's early in Malcolm's ministry under this title.

Est 4 v 6-11. Mordecai, through Hathach, urges Esther to act but Esther is initially reluctant. Esther does not act straight away and highlights the difficulties of her helping. Esther rationalises not helping.

Est 4 v 12-14. Mordecai knows that God will still deliver without Esther but the cost will be high. (On what basis does Mordecai have the confidence in God's delivery? He knew from Scripture what had been promised through prophesy that the Jews had a future part in God's plans and as such would not be destroyed. Mordecai's confidence was not blind optimism but well founded confidence.)

Est 4 v 15-17 Esther is convicted by Mordecai words and steps up. Esther is bold, decisive and brave.

- In what ways do we rationalise away what we know we should do?
- In what ways are we being convicted of something we know we should do but are reluctant to?
- Esther's choice to act made a material difference. What are the choices that we face that could make a Kingdom difference both to ourselves and to others?

(These don't have to be big things, in fact they are much more likely to be small. Like changing the way we behave with friends or work colleagues – not swearing, not laughing at course jokes, not gossiping or being unkind to someone behind their back)

Could also be an unhealthy addition to something, gambling, pornography, alcohol, drugs, or not being honest with our finances, tax returns, insurance claims etc, not fully tithing, anger, unforgiveness, the desire for status, recognition or material possessions) Really try to encourage the group to be open here. Again, you might have to share/risk something yourself. These are the moments of accountability, where under the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, real changes start.

- How can we, like Esther be bold, decisive and brave?

You might like to conclude with a summary of the lessons learnt from the Men and Women of God of the Old Testament we have looked at. Finish with encouraging the group to be bold, brave and decisive Kingdom of God difference makers! To be men and women of God!

Prayers:

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