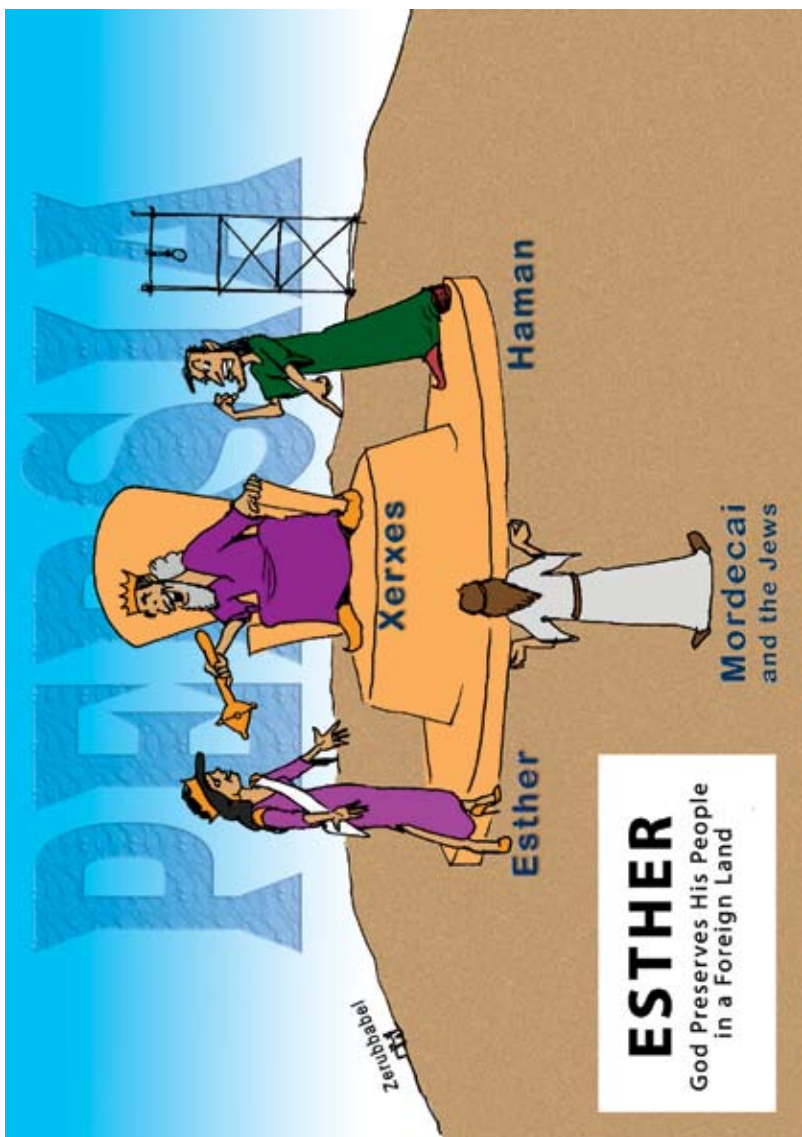


Esther - Job



Monday: Esther 1-4

Tuesday: Esther 5-Job 2

Wednesday: Job 3-7

Thursday: Job 8-11

Friday: Job 12-17

Introduction

Esther

In this week's reading we officially step out of the flow of Old Testament history. Esther is the last historical book in the Old Testament and it, like Ruth, does not propel the main story line any further. In fact, the book of Nehemiah is the last book in the chronological flow of Israel's history. Esther is a story that takes place between chapters 6 and 7 of the book of Ezra. Refer to the chart from last week and you will notice that the story of Esther takes place during the reign of Xerxes in the land of Persia in between the return of Zerubbabel and Ezra.

From a purely literary perspective, Esther's story is a wonderful drama full of twists and turns, suspense, heroes and villains, and a real good-guy-wins-in-the-end finale that brings the crowd to its feet. Ironically, Esther is the only book in the Bible where the name of God is never mentioned. While His name is not mentioned, His hand of protection is definitely visible. Esther is the story of God's protection over the vast majority of Jews who chose to stay in Persia after the permission was granted to return to Jerusalem.

In many ways the story of Esther is similar to the story of the Civil Rights movement in the United States. In the US the African-American population

had been residents on American soil for centuries. In many cases African-American blood had been on this soil far longer than European immigrants of the 19th century. Yet, they were not allowed the rights of citizenship. They were no longer Africans. The notion of Africa was a vague, abstract concept. They had never been there, didn't speak the language, and had no connection to the culture. However, they were not fully American, either. They were a people caught between cultures and without a place to truly call home. Because of the courageous efforts of key leaders, the African-American population stood its ground and demanded equal rights in the land that was as much their home as anyone else who lived here. In the same way, the Jews had been taken captive and brought to the land of Persia against their will (it was actually Babylon when they were taken). The exile lasted for 70 years, allowing an entire generation to be born and raised on Persian soil. This generation of Jews was no longer Jerusalemites. The idea of Israel and Jerusalem and the Temple was nothing more than an abstract notion and the painful memory of their parents. This generation of Jews was Persians who did not own the freedom to be Persians. All they had known their whole life was to be viewed as second-class citizens and kept at bay by the majority of Persians.

When Haman allowed his pride to spark hatred toward Mordecai, he became vengeful toward Mordecai's people, the Jews. The fact that king Xerxes didn't even bat an eye at the thought of eradicating the entire Jewish population is evidence that the Jews carried a very low social standing in the empire. The story of Esther is a story of one woman's courage to stand up to the king and fight for her people's rights to defend themselves against ruthless genocidal attacks. The victory that Esther won for

her people was extremely significant; so much so that it was memorialized by an annual feast called Purim. Purim is still celebrated today by the Jewish community as a celebration of freedom, liberty, and God's sovereign protection for his people, even when they are in a foreign land.

Job

Even though we are spending three days in Job this week, we are going to hold off until next week to introduce the book. Next week's devotional will be completely dedicated to the study of this very complex epic poem. We will grapple with questions like, "why do bad things happen to good people?" "How do I look at God when my world is falling apart?" "What is the purpose of pain and suffering?"

Monday: For Such a Time as This

Esther 1-4

What were the circumstances that led Esther to become the queen?

Into what dangerous situation had the Jews been placed by Haman's anger?

What did Mordecai mean when he said, "who knows but that you have come to royal position of such a time as this?"

Food for thought:

If you haven't noticed yet, life tends to take many unexpected twists and turns along its course. As young people we tend to dream big dreams and set a course for ourselves that makes complete sense. If we are Christians during that trajectory-setting stage, we may even make very godly plans for our lives. Then, we set out to follow our dreams.

Many times, as we venture out, circumstances come across our path that seem to make no sense at all. Our parents become ill and we must take care of them, putting our schooling on hold. A child is born that has a birth defect that demands much of our time and attention. A close friend betrays us and we lose something significant, whether it be a financial loss, our reputation, or our trust in the goodness of people. A world event strikes -- the attack on the World Trade Center, economic collapse, the outbreak of war -- and everything is turned upside down. No matter how large or small the "interruptions" may be, we must constantly make course corrections along the path of life.

When this happens, how do you respond? Do you shake a fist at God and say, "how could you do this to me? I thought we had a deal." Do you throw up your hands in defeat and say, "I'm never going to accomplish anything."

As a young, Jewish girl, living as a second-class citizen, Esther probably never imagined that her path would lead to the throne of Persia. In this place in time, space, and history, a young girl's fate was completely in the hands of the men in her culture. In the beginning, Esther was nothing more than a pretty face. That face got her selected to be part of the beauty pageant that Xerxes had assembled in

order to find a replacement for his former, stubborn, self-willed queen Vashti. Esther was caught up in a whirlwind of beauty treatments and cultural training that was forced upon her by the culture that had been oppressing her people for 70 years.

What could have been going through her mind during this period of time? “God, why have you allowed your people to be oppressed like this for so long?” “Why have you allowed me to be treated like a hunk of meat or a pig shown at the county fair?” “Why must I be told what to do by these people?” “Now that I have been chosen to be the queen, the maidservant of Xerxes, how am I to behave? Am I supposed to love this man? How can I be at peace when I cannot even enter his presence without his invitation? How can I be free when my mere facial expressions could cost me my life? Why, God?”

Then, one day, Mordecai made a proposition to Esther. She was to go before the King and blow the whistle on Haman and request equal rights for the Jews. This act could bring her the death sentence. By doing this she would be risking everything. Then Mordecai uttered those immortal words. “Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?”

Yes, Esther, there was a reason for all the injustices you suffered. There was a reason for everything. Esther stepped up to the plate and acted upon the opportunity that God had orchestrated for her to make a big difference in the lives of her people.

In our lives we may never get to see the dramatic, big-picture reason why circumstances happen in our lives, but we can hold on to the truth that we learn in Esther’s story. God does have a reason for it all. It has been said that there is no waste in God’s economy. Paul told us that God can bring good out of

all things for those who love Him.

Whatever your circumstances are today, no matter how trying they may be, remember that God is in control. Even when we can't make sense out of it, God is working His good. Try to find the good today, and give God the glory.

Tuesday: The Destructive Power of Pride

Esther 6:1-7:10

What was Haman expecting when the King summoned into his chamber? To whom did he think the King was referring?

What did he find to be the purpose of the king's summons? How did he respond?

How must Haman have felt with that ironic twist of fate?

What ironic ending ultimately happened to Haman? How did you feel when you read this?

Food for thought:

Many times we can learn a great deal when we study the villain in a story. Haman is a classic villain in the drama of Esther. He is full of himself and is driven by the need to be idolized by everyone. His entire self-concept is wrapped up in the notion that every person in the kingdom bows before his presence.

Can't you just picture the scene in your mind? Haman enters the picture and the people fall to the ground in waves. With every prostrate subject that falls, another pump of pompous air rushes into the ego of Haman's head. He struts before the abject masses, gloating his superiority. And then, pop! There is a burst in the bubble. There is a wrinkle in the perfect picture. The air begins hissing out of Haman's ego as he stares across the crowd at one lone figure who is...standing. Mordecai! That one man; that insolent creature who dares defy Haman's magnificence! No one will stand in Haman's way. Mordecai will pay! Play the dramatic music.

Isn't that exactly what pride does to us? Pride is a self-focused attitude. When pride rules our lives we must be in control of our circumstances. We must be in control of the people around us. Our agendas must rule the day. Pride is all about control. With pride there is no room for loving the other. The other is simply a means to our self-appointed agenda. With pride there is no room for varying opinions or competitive viewpoints. With pride all opposition must be eliminated. With absolute pride and absolute control come absolute corruption and the propensity to take any measure - even the eradication of a race -- to preserve the desired self-image.

How much control does pride have on your life today? Are you able to lovingly entertain ideas that

are contrary to your own? Are you able to share the spotlight with others or even, heaven forbid, admit that others are better or more qualified in something than you are? Are you able to share your burdens with others and allow them to see your weaknesses so that they can hold you accountable and prop you up in times of weakness? Are you able to keep your mouth closed when it is not your turn to speak and let someone else have an original idea without stealing some of their thunder?

If you said no to any of these questions, then you may be struggling with pride. Hear this, the person who walks with pride will always get hung on his own gallows.

Ultimately pride is a form of deception. It is lying. No one is as good or as competent or as powerful as pride presents us to be. The projection of pride is a false projection and a lie. Lies breed lies. Truth speakers expose lies. Liars try to silence truth speakers. There is conflict, there is bloodshed, and ultimately, when pride is unchecked, there is tragedy.

The antithesis of pride is humility. Humility is not weakness, it is truth. Humility speaks the truth in all circumstances. Humility says, "I am good at this, not so good at that. You are good at this and I applaud you for it. Let me do this and you do that. Together we can make a great team."

Mordecai was a truth speaker. He was a humble man who patiently did what was right, and in the end was exalted.

Where are you today? Are you more like Haman, building gallows somewhere to preserve your all-important image. Or are you like Mordecai, content with being a lowly truth-speaker, patiently waiting on the sovereign hand of God to do His work in His

timing?

Wednesday: God and Satan

Job 1:6-2:10

Who is present in the “Heavenly Court”?

What accusation does Satan make against Job?

Who is ultimately in control of this situation?

Food for Thought:

Coming across these two chapters in our daily reading offers us a good opportunity to stop and look at a question that a lot of people have, but don't like to talk much about. "Who is Satan?"

From these chapters (and drawing from the full counsel of scripture) we can make some observations about Satan.

1. **The word Satan is not a name, it means "the accuser"**. In this title we see the only power that the accuser has; to point the finger and cast doubt. In the garden the serpent said, "Did God really say..." and accused God of malicious intent. Here, the accuser points the finger at Job and says, "Does he really love you, God, or is it just because you have given him such nice things?"
2. **The Satan is not in Hell.** It says he was walking about the Earth. Peter says we have an adversary that prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour. Hell, as it is depicted in the book of Revelation, is not a present reality, but is an eternal destiny for the accuser after all things have been restored. Today, the accuser is the "prince and the power of the air", he is the "prince of this age." We, as Christians, are behind enemy lines, trying to establish outposts of the Kingdom of God in the midst of overwhelming darkness caused by the deceptive influence of the accuser.
3. **The Satan is accountable to God, not an equal and opposing force.** One of the greatest heresies regarding Satan is the belief that Satan and God are in a cosmic struggle between

good and evil. This notion is an eastern one. Perhaps you have seen the black and white, interlocking swooshes, called the yin and yang. These symbols represent the existence of equal and opposing forces in the universe that must both exist in order for balance to be maintained. This observation of the physical universe has been projected into the spiritual world and sparked the belief that “good” and “evil” are equal and opposing forces that will be caught in an eternal struggle for dominance (the idea behind all the Star Wars movies, by the way). This is just not true. The difference between God and the accuser is like the difference between light and dark. Light is a something, dark is the absence of a something. Dark has no substance to snuff out light. Dark is simply the absence of light. Light does not struggle with dark. When it is present, darkness ceases to exist, because it never really existed in the first place. The Satan is simply one of God’s created beings that has freely chosen to reject God’s truth and tries to upset the perfect creation that God established. He has no power that has not been given to him by God. Satan’s wanderings about the Earth are a testing of Man’s heart, under the supervision of God.

- 4. Ultimately, man is responsible for sin.** Notice that, once the accuser inflicted Job with his pain, he dropped out of the picture altogether. Job was left to deal with his “friends” and with God Himself. The accuser is never blamed for the pain, nor is he brought back in at the end. He simply did his job of making the accusation and creating a space of testing for Job.

Thursday: Why, God, Why?

Job 10

Try to summarize Job's speech to God in your own words?

What is the tone of Job's speech?

Food for Thought:

How honest are you with God? How often do you speak to God exactly how you are feeling? In this chapter Job really let's loose on God. He tells it like he feels it.

Here are some thoughts about this chapter

- 1. Sometimes even good people can feel miserable.** Notice the first words of the chapter. Job says, "I loathe my very life, therefore I will give free rein to my complaint and speak out in the bitterness of my soul." Job had lost everything. He was sick and in pain. And, he hadn't done anything wrong. In your life, you will experience pain and suffering. That comes with the territory. In those moments, take comfort to know that a) it is not necessarily a punishment, b) you are not alone in your pain, and others have traveled the road before.
- 2. It is OK to verbalize your emotions to God.** God did not reach down and smack Job for speaking the way he did. His friends scolded him for it, that's true. God ultimately set him straight in his thinking, yes. But, in the moment, God allowed Job to vent his frustration and pain. God is big enough and strong enough to handle all of our emotions. He invites us to unload our burden on Him. Sometimes this process is the cathartic healing that we need.
- 3. It is even OK to doubt God in moments of pain and suffering.** Job said in v. 18, "*why then did you bring me out of the womb.*" To paraphrase the section, Job is saying, "God, you are almighty and powerful and formed me

and control everything. Did you make me just to watch me suffer? That seems a little sick to me. Is this really what it's all about?" If we could be honest with ourselves, how many times have we entertained this idea in the back of our minds but been afraid to verbalize it in fear that we might get struck by lightning? Job laid it all out before God, pain, suffering, doubts, and all.

In today's reading there is no quick fix at the end. Chapter 10 is just a sampling of many, many chapters where Job is wrestling with his notions about God's goodness in the light of seemingly pointless and arbitrary suffering. Next week we will deal more with the answers to these questions. For now, the point is this...be honest with God. If you are in pain and hurting and don't have rational answers for the stuff that is happening in your life, don't let it keep you from talking to God. Bring all that gunk to God, He can take it. The first step to healing is to admit that the majority of life is pretty messed up and the world we live in is a complex set of tangled circumstances that don't always make sense. When we admit it and bring the tangled mess to God, and don't try to hide from Him the fact that we are confused (like we could hide it from Him anyway) then He can come alongside us and help us to begin untangling the mess, little by little, piece by piece.

Friday: What to Say When Someone Hurts

Job 12:1-6, Job 16:1-5

Job's friends have been gathering around him trying to "figure out" why Job is suffering. Their unanimous conclusion is that he has been harboring sin in his life and simply needs to confess it in order to be healed.

Read these two passages and summarize what Job's response is to his friends "helpful advice."

Food for thought:

Here's the scene. A person plops down in the middle of the room, obviously dejected, and the words that pour out of their mouth sound like a bad country/western tune. "My wife left me, my dog left me, my pickup truck broke down, I got fired from my job, and my heart is giving out." What do you do?

Do you think to yourself, "Oh boy, I don't have time for this kind of pain. This situation is going to suck me dry. If a person is in this much pain and misery, there must be a reason for it. Bad things like this just don't happen to good people. This person probably deserves the pain they are suffering. If he would just confess and get right with God then we could all move on and spend time doing positive things."

Wow! You are probably alone right now, having your quiet time. No one will know. Admit it. You've thought those thoughts before, haven't you? We all have. No one likes pain. No one likes to see other people suffer. It makes us very uncomfortable.

Listen to some very stinging words of truth spoken by the very insightful, and suffering, Job. In 12:5 Job says, "*Men at ease have contempt for misfortune as the fate of those whose feet are slipping*" The Contemporary English Version puts it this way, "*It's easy to condemn those who are suffering, when you have no troubles.*"

In ch. 16 Job goes on to critique his "friends" who are trying "help" him in his time of need. He says, "

*I also could speak like you,
if you were in my place;
I could make fine speeches against you
and shake my head at you.*

*⁵ But my mouth would encourage you;
comfort from my lips would bring you relief.*

Underscore those words, “my mouth would encourage you; comfort from my lips would bring you relief.”

Here is the lesson for today. When a person comes to you in a time of pain, guess what...THEY DON'T WANT YOU TO FIX IT!!!!!! What a person needs is a comforting presence. They need to know that there is at least one person in the world who cares enough to simply listen to them; to allow them the space to vent their pain and frustration and confusion without being condemned or accused. They are already feeling accused and condemned enough. Because of their pain, they are struggling with their understanding of God, the one foundation upon which they thought they were standing when times were good. With this foundation in question their entire world is falling apart and they cannot sense the presence of God's arms around them. In that moment you need to BE God's arms around them. You need to be the embodiment, the incarnation, of unconditional love that will smother them and allow them space to come out of the chaos. In that moment they don't need a theological treatise on the sovereignty of God. They don't need to hear Romans 8:28 shoved down their throat. They need to feel the physical presence of comfort. Sometimes the best thing to do, in that moment, is to simply close the mouth and open the arms. Let them cry and vent. God can handle it.

As a community of Christ that is trying to be a community that shepherds people and guides them into deeper places with God, we must come to grips with the fact that we will have tragedy in our midst. We will have hurting sheep. Loved ones will die, sometimes even children. Sickness will set in. Families may fall apart. Jobs will be lost. Let's not be a church that shoots its wounded. Let's not be

Bildad, Eliphaz, and Zophar. Let's be "God with skin on" for those who are hurting. Over time, through our acceptance of the person in their current state, their mind will clear, and, as Job will at the end of the book, we will have the opportunity to speak truth to them and get them on the right path again. Be patient, it will come.