

 3 January – 14 February 2021

Life Group Study Notes

Esther

*God’s hidden hand*

 Introduction

As we begin this New Year with about as much uncertainty concerning the future with which we ended 2020, the book of Esther is an ideal antidote. If there is one message from Esther, it is this: God is always working for good in the world, even when he feels completely absent.

For many of us at the moment we are still trying to figure out where is God in this current global pandemic. Is he teaching us a lesson about what we value in life? Or is he completely absent, taking forty winks while the world goes crazy? The book of Esther demonstrates quite clearly that even when we feel that God has withdrawn his favour from humanity, he is clearly there, working behind the scenes.

I hope you will have some lively discussions in your Life Groups these next six weeks.

Chris Tebbutt January 2021

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# **3 January 2021 Exile and God’s hidden hand Esther 1**

**Welcome**

Welcome all the members to the group, especially any new ones. If you are missing any members send them a text or WhatsApp to let them know you’re praying for them.

**Worship**

Come together in worship. Ask the Holy Spirit to bless your time together. If there are prayer needs bring them before the Lord either now, or at the end of the meeting.

**Word - Preparation**

**Read the Book of Esther** (it won’t take too long!)

**Re-read Chapter 1** – make a list of the key points

The Book of Esther begins with King Xerxes (sometimes known as Ahasuerus) celebrating with a lavish party his complete power over the whole Middle East and beyond. His empire stretched from the Upper Nile region (Cush, modern day Egypt and Ethiopia) to India and its all controlled from Susa, in Persia.

The timing is after the Exile to Babylon of the Jews, about 460 BC, just before the historical accounts Nehemiah and Ezra, but after Daniel. Many of the Jews have been absorbed into the culture of the successive empires of Babylon, Media and Persia. But from this book, clearly many, such as Mortdecai, one of the heroes of this story, have retained their distinctiveness as the people of God and have forsaken the pagan culture.

The age-old struggles of minorities are highlighted in this book, particularly discrimination on the grounds of religion and gender.

Queen Vashti’s refusal to submit to a request to be a ‘trophy wife’ to (a probably drunken) Xerxes is met with indignation and fear that this might lead to emancipation among the women within the kingdom.

The scene is set for the misuse of power, political intrigue, plots to murder and scapegoat minorities.

But where is God in all this? Will he just stand back and let a tyrant triumph over ordinary people? And will he use his people – the Jews- to be ‘a light to lighten the Gentiles’? and expose this injustice?

**Word - At the Life Group**

Split up the Chapter 1 and read it through.

Exchange thoughts about studying this book, now.

Do you see any parallels in recent world events, such as the ‘Me too’ campaign, or Black Lives Matter?

Although these are secular movements, could God be working through their campaigners?

**Witness**

Where do you see injustice, abuse of power, oppression and discrimination today? Is the Church compliant or campaigning against this injustice?

What issues in our community or context could our church be campaigning for?

# **10 January 2021 Moral dilemmas in a corrupt system Esther 2**

**Welcome**

Welcome all the members to the group. Exchange what sort of week you’ve had and whether you have any prayer requests.

**Worship**

Ask the Holy Spirit to bless your time together in prayer. Also, pray for those in your group who might be ill, or have relatives, friends and colleagues who are suffering, especially from the impact of COVID.

**Word - Preparation**

**If you haven’t already - read the Book of Esther** (it won’t take too long!)
**Re-read Chapter 2** – make a list of the key points

**Word - At the Life Group**

1. Why do you think ‘Xerxes remembered Vashti’? What or who do you think was behind it?
2. Mordecai was a Jew living a faithful life under the law of Moses, so it seems. How do you think he squared that with living under a corrupt and pagan regime? How have you had to compromise your faith and believe in your life? What moral dilemmas has that given you?
3. Contrast the story of Esther with the similar narrative of Joseph and the people of Israel in Egypt. What is the key difference?
4. Esther is inducted into the harem following the beauty pageant. How is our society complicit in emphasising outward beauty and physical attraction and what has this done, and is doing, to the mental health of our young people, especially young girls?

**Growing into the likeness of Christ...**

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1. Do you think Esther was a willing recipient of all the benefits of becoming queen or an exploited victim?
2. By the end of the chapter, both Esther and Mordecai are manoeuvred into positions of considerable power. Were both seduced by power which overrode their Jewish upbringing under the Law, or was it simply God positioning them for the coming threat?

**Witness**

Do you think the Church is a prophetic enough voice in the current culture?

To end, listen to Faithful One. https://youtu.be/HROSwkRwpPI

# **[17 January 2021 Encountering Opposition as God’s people Esther 3](#_17_January_2021)**

**Welcome & Prayer**

Welcome all the members to the group. Check on absent members and send a reminder if they are not accounted for. Pray for any unable to attend and ask the Holy Spirit to come and bless your meeting.

**Word - Preparation**

**Listen to the Sermon** on the 17 January ‘Church’ service on our website [www.canfordparish.org](http://www.canfordparish.org)

**Re-read Chapter 3** – make a list of any key points that jump out at you.

**Questions you might ask**

1. Why do you think the Jewish nation have been targeted for the sort of treatment we see in this Chapter?
2. What other similar historical instances that have occurred can you name? (e.g.– Rwanda). What were the common factors? What were the differences to the Jewish threat?
3. Was Haman’s ‘an eye for an eye’ approach justified in the light of what happened to his ancestor Agag and the Jewish Law?
4. Where do you see God at work in this chapter?
5. What might this be saying into our current context for minorities and those targeted by the powerful who are threatened with genocide?

**Witness**

What action should the church be taking in response to these threats?

Listen to:
O Lord, the clouds are gathering   <https://youtu.be/Xfv9OI59_7o>

# **24 January 2021 Kairos Moments in our lives that cost Esther 4:1-14**

**Welcome & Prayer**

Welcome all the members to the group. Check on absent members and send a reminder if they are not accounted for. Pray for any unable to attend and ask the Holy Spirit to come and bless your meeting.

**Word - Preparation**

**Listen to the Sermon from Sunday 24 January**

**Re-read Chapter 4** – make a list of the key points that jump out at you.

Focus on the Greek word *Kairos* -definition: **right, critical, or opportune moment**

**Word – questions at the Life Group**

1. Have you spotted critical moments in the story? Which have stood out for you?

Comment on events that had occurred in previous chapters and were needed at this point in the narrative.

2. Have there been such moments of significance in your life where the past has influenced the present?

3. Have you had to stand up for what you believe to be right, in the words of a former Canford Rector, Peter Lawrence, to ‘go to the stake for’?

4. Reread Luke 5, the calling of the disciples.

5. Where do you see God at work in this chapter? Was this an opportune moment for Jesus? Did the boats happen to be there? Why choose that particular one belonging to Simon?

6. As a summary in the sermon it was said: Be patient, be wise obey the commandments, seek and recognise opportunities. Do you agree? Discuss

**Witness**

Should we, as church, be more proactive in for example:

* climate change,
* speaking out against abuse in its many forms
* injustice

# [January 31 2021 Courage and obedience in a crisis Esther 4:15-5:8 Welcome & Prayer](#_January_31_2021)

#

Welcome all the members to the group and go round the group asking how everyone is. Pray for any unable to attend and ask the Holy Spirit to come and bless your meeting.

# Word - Preparation

**Listen to the Sermon from Sunday 31 January from Chris** **Read and reflect on Chapter 4:15-5:8, and also up to the end of the chapter** – what are the things that shout loudly at you from the story?

There are many turning points, *Kairos* moments, in this story. Today’s passage is another one of them, when we see power shifting first from Mordecai to Esther, then from king Xerxes and Haman, to Esther.

# Word – questions at the Life Group

1. After initially being circumspect about Mordecai’s request for Esther to speak out to the king, what do you think changed her mind? 4:12-15
2. Why is fasting but not prayer mentioned in 4:15—16?
3. As queen, why would simply approaching the king without being requested potentially result in Esther’s death?
4. Chapter 5 begins with serious seduction. But who now has control of the situation? 5:1—5a?

**Growing into the likeness of Christ…**  2

1. Why is Esther dicing with death by deferring her request to the following day? 5:7-8
2. The storyteller ‘ups the anti’ by introducing Haman and Mordecai’s feud again. Why is it that Haman hasn’t been told of the special relationship between Mordecai and queen Esther? 5:9-13
3. What’s the special significance of building even taller gallows for Mordecai? 5:14

# Witness

The Book of Esther seems devoid of God’s presence, and yet he is clearly at work powerfully in a providential way. How often do we explain away the ‘coincidences of life’, and forget to credit God with the glory?

# **7 February 2021 The God of the Great Turnaround**

**Esther 7-8**

**Welcome & Prayer**

Welcome all the members to the group and go round the group asking how everyone is. Pray for any unable to attend and ask the Holy Spirit to come and bless your meeting.

**Word - Preparation**

**Listen to the Sermon from Sunday 7 February from Chris**

**This week we span three chapters. To familiarise yourself of the story re-read Chapters 6, 7 and 8.**

Plot the changes in fortune of

* Mordecai
* Esther
* Haman

Note the providential hand of God in each of these changes.

**Word – questions at the Life Group**

1. Where have you seen God’s providence working in your life? And when have you felt he’s been absent? What happened next?
2. Do you find it hard to trust God when situations are not going great? Do you have a tendency to try to control things rather than trusting in God?
3. Chris talks about taking human responsibility – our part in God’s plan. Is there a difficult situation you are putting off, a decision, conversation, or action?
4. The book of James tells us mercy triumphs over judgement. But what about those who don’t understand repentance? Or purposefully turn their backs on God?
5. Compare the ending of Haman’s sin and evil as he hung on the gallows, compared to Jesus’ end to sin and death on the cross (2 Corinthians 5:21)

**Witness**

How often do you say those words from the Baptism Service?

* I turn to Christ.
* I repent of my sins.
* I renounce evil.

Think about making it a part of your daily routine.

End in prayer for one another. Especially ask if there is anything that has been raised in the study that someone might want to unburden.

# **14 February 2021 Purim celebrated!**

# **Esther 9:20-32**

 **Welcome & Prayer**

Sunday was St Valentine’s Day and reminds us that we are to celebrate as a people of love (perhaps less Eros and more Agape!). Discuss any major celebrations coming up personally in your calendar, special birthdays, anniversary, etc.

**Word - Preparation**

Read Chapters 9 and 10 of Esther.

Listen to the Sermon from Sunday 14 February from Chris

**Word – questions at the Life Group**

1. This is the last session in this series. What have been the key ‘take-aways’ and highlights you’ve learned from the series?
2. Think about other major festivals in the Hebrew calendar, e.g. Passover, Hannukah, etc. What is common about all these festivals? Look up some of the references in Chris’ sermon (e.g. Zechariah 8:19)
3. Now reflect on the calendar of the Christian festivals as we approach Lent (you may be meeting on Shrove Tuesday!) Do we get the balance right between lament and celebration?
4. Why should Christians embrace the Book of Esther as much as the Jewish people?

**Witness**

Plan an appropriate celebration for coming out of lockdown, to encourage the more anxious members of the group. We have been in a season of lament for nearly a year now, and we can learn from the Jews in terms balancing it with celebration when released from captivity and threat.