

GLENKIRK CHURCH



WEEKLY DEVOTIONS

The DEVO

APRIL 27 - MAY 1, 2020

SERMON SERIES

4.19 - 5.17

LIVING IN

Exile



MONDAY

Jeremiah 29:7; Esther 4:6-17; Philippians 2:3-4

This week we consider Esther, who lived in Medo-Persia and became queen during the time of Judah's post-exile resettlement. Esther bravely revealed her Jewishness, risking her own life to intercede for her fellow Jews. She subordinated self-interest to community welfare, a timely example for us in light of the current pandemic crisis. Let's start with a brief summary of this beautiful book packed with intrigue, life-threatening challenges and heroism.

After Persian King Ahasuerus (Xerxes) dismissed Queen Vashti in about 470 BC, he staged a competition to determine her successor. Mordecai had raised his orphaned cousin, Esther, and encouraged her to enter the contest; she did and became queen (while initially keeping her Jewishness secret). Mordecai, later learning of a planned uprising against the king, advised Esther of this and the plot was squelched.

Upon promotion to second-in-command, the king's "cabinet member" Haman fumed at Mordecai's refusal to honor him. Vengeful Haman engineered a law to plunder and destroy Jews living in the empire. Mordecai appealed to Esther to intervene with Ahasuerus against the statute, although such petition could prompt her execution. Esther entertained the king and Haman, and she related circumstances that revealed Mordecai's faithfulness and Haman's treachery. Haman had built gallows to hang Mordecai; instead, Ahasuerus promoted Mordecai and executed Haman on this same gallows.

In encouraging Esther, Mordecai reasoned, “*Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*” (Esther 4:14). The Jews were saved by Esther’s intervention and thereafter celebrated the commemorative Feast of Purim. Esther and Mordecai, like Joseph and Daniel before them, were faithful Jewish foreigners who ascended to prominent positions in the world’s then-leading empire. As we’ll explore later this week, God remains in control and has allowed current circumstances for our ultimate benefit (Romans 8:28) and His glory.

How can you and I exemplify how “*the last shall be first*” (Matthew 20:16), selflessly serving others in our community amidst such trying times? As conscientious citizens we must sustain *physical* distancing. However, this is not the time for “social distancing.” Whom should you love in Jesus’ name, responsibly connecting with the lost, lonely and/or hurting?

QUESTIONS

What circumstances led to Esther’s ascent as queen in ancient Medo-Persia? How did God use her to save the Jews, turning the tables on their enemy?

PRAYERS FOR FOR HIS CHILDREN

Pray for For His Children (FHC), a ministry founded on the principle that each child is created in God’s image. FHC provides care and love to vulnerable children in Ecuador until they can be reunited with families or be adopted. The staff members provide a home for newborns to young adults who have experienced abandonment, abuse, or neglect.

TUESDAY

Jeremiah 29:7; Mark 1:2-8; Acts 22:12-21

Esther and Mordecai's story unfolded amidst the backdrop transitioning world powers. Babylon had fallen to Medo-Persia, after which new leadership supported the Jews' repopulation of Judea. The first wave of Jewish re-settlers was in motion. However, it appears that Esther and Mordecai would not return to Judea. Why?

Yesterday we compared Esther and Mordecai with their faithful predecessors, Joseph and Daniel. However, there is another curious parallel among these Old Testament figures: while each persevered and prospered amidst exile, none returned to Israel alive. We can excuse Daniel here, as he was elderly by the time of Medo-Persia's takeover. But might we criticize Esther, Mordecai and Joseph for eschewing the Promised Land? Had they become too worldly? Or, was God perhaps keeping them amidst pagans as "salt and light" (Matthew 5:13-14)? The Bible is silent here.

We can, however, look to at least three New Testament figures exemplifying being "in the world, while not of it" (paraphrasing John 15:19 and 17:14-16). This starts with Jesus Himself, our Emmanuel. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14); He is the supreme Example of loving and impacting the world while transcending its corruption. Jesus prayed for His faithful disciples in kind (John 17:6-19); they generally displayed an "in, but not of the world" orientation after the Holy Spirit's subsequent coming and filling (Acts 2).

John the Baptist also lived with a “not of the world” emphasis, perhaps to the extreme. He fulfilled his mission as the Messiah’s forerunner, serving ascetically in the Judean wilderness while calling the Hebrews to repentance and baptism. Paul likewise mixed among the people throughout the Mediterranean region, faithful to his vocation as “*the apostle to the Gentiles*” (Romans 11:13). Like John, Paul’s career included self-denial, personal hardships and, ultimately, martyrdom for God’s glory. Both men impacted the kingdom, faithfully witnessing to the lost.

Is it better to endure amidst “exile,” as Esther did, or was John’s calling to seclusion or Paul’s mobile mission more admirable? Those are God’s decisions. Wherever God places us, we are called to faithfulness. How can you be a true, fruitful servant given current circumstances? To what is He calling you?

QUESTIONS

Were Esther and Mordecai unfaithful in not returning to Judah? What does it mean to be “in the world, but not of the world”? Who are some prominent New Testament examples of “in, while not of the world”?

PRAYERS FOR FOR HIS CHILDREN

Pray for continued health and protection for each child and caregiver at For His Children.

WEDNESDAY

Ruth 3:8-11; Judges 4:3-5; Romans 16:1-7

One of the common knocks against the Bible is that it encourages downgrading and oppressing women. Old Testament examples of women treated like property are cited, as are the Apostle Paul's epistles and associated guidelines seemingly limiting women's church roles. But are such criticisms valid? Do the Bible and Christianity subjugate women?

This week's featured biblical heroine, Esther, is just one example of women scripturally celebrated and esteemed; and Esther's case is not isolated. Ruth, also the namesake of an Old Testament book, was a celebrated picture of loyalty and faithfulness. Jews continue to read the book of Ruth and honor her throughout the harvest festival of Shavuot (Pentecost). Rahab, a foreigner like Ruth and a "harlot" to boot, was esteemed for her role enabling the Israelites' capture of Jericho (Joshua 2, 6). Deborah was a prophetess and Israel's fourth judge—a God-sent leader of the Israelites prior to the kings (Judges 4-5).

As the New Testament commences, the Virgin Mary is called to bear the Messiah. Her associated challenges, including being labeled an adulteress by some, are hard to overstate. Mary was, however, "*blessed among women*" (Luke 1:42). Her devotion and strength enabled her to be with Jesus even amidst His agony—enduring a mother's heartbreak—on Calvary's cross while ten cowardly disciples fled the scene. She was there among other faithful women who persevered with the Savior to the end (John 19:25).

The Apostle Paul, a “male chauvinist” in the eyes of many, shared his ministry with numerous women and commended them, including Phoebe (Romans 16:1-2), Priscilla (Acts 18:24-26), and an early European convert to Christianity, Lydia (Acts 16:14-15), among others. This same Paul famously penned, “*There is not Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, for you are all one and the same in Christ Jesus*” (Galatians 3:28).

Don't let a Bible critic hamstring you with half-truths or proof texts absent context. Women were, and often continue to be, mistreated and marginalized throughout our world. But our Lord does not condone this. Know the Scriptures and their context so that you can lovingly correct any “politically correct” skeptic offering related, misinformed challenges.

QUESTIONS

Was the Apostle Paul a male chauvinist? How does the Bible elevate the stature of women vs. prevailing ancient cultural norms? Why is knowing the Bible important when conversing with a politically correct skeptic?

PRAYERS FOR FOR HIS CHILDREN

Pray for the staff and their families of For His Children during this time of uncertainty.

THURSDAY

Jeremiah 29:11-13; Habakkuk 1:1-5

The pandemic dominating the media and current, everyday existence may provoke this lament from some: “Where is God in all of this?” Others might challenge: “If God exists and is good and all-powerful, then how could He permit ____?” The Bible doesn’t duck such questions, however, sharing unvarnished truth and plumbing the depths of the human condition; e.g., “*My tears have been my food day and night, while they say to me all the day long, ‘Where is your God?’*” (Psalm 42:3).

Esther is particularly interesting, given our circumstances. It is the Bible’s only book wherein God is not mentioned—yet God’s sovereign will prevails throughout. “The main purpose of [Esther] lies precisely in ... the hand of Providence. ... how the invisible God of the Jews, the Unseen, without coming into prominence, directs history in accordance with His will, even for the undeserving, because He has His hand upon them. ... [This book illustrates] the triumph of God over Fate.” (Peter Pett)

Jeremiah 29:11-13 offers particular comfort amidst times like these, with encouragement both for believer—“*I know the plans I have for you ... plans for good ... to give you a future and a hope*”—and unbeliever alike—“*You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart.*” It parallels the promise of Romans 8:28: “*... in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose*” (NIV).

This morning, while pondering today's devotional, I listened to a teacher I've increasingly appreciated, Steve Gregg. I'll paraphrase Gregg's highly relevant teaching: "God is fully in control, even amidst extreme trials like pandemics. We can see life like the backside of a tapestry—a seemingly haphazard collection of colored strings looking tangled and discordant. But our God is the Creator and 'Weaver'—when the front of the tapestry is seen, as He views and crafts it, a meaningful and beautiful picture emerges."

Feeling lonely in isolation? God is in control. Fearful for your own or other's safety? God is in control. Do you know anybody who is despairing? When better to share Jesus' love and, perhaps, Jeremiah 29:11-13?

QUESTIONS

How does the Bible address everyday fears, doubts and questions that all, even believers at times, might have? What is a key theme of the book of Esther?

PRAYERS FOR FOR HIS CHILDREN

Pray for the people of Ecuador. Their health system is not very strong and their economy was already struggling. This crisis will have a deep and probably lasting negative impact on the most vulnerable. We know that this can in turn result in higher levels of child abuse and neglect.

FRIDAY

Jeremiah 29:7; James 1:2-4; 2 Corinthians 1:3-5

Christ followers are acquainted with persevering during trials; the Bible encourages us accordingly. The newborn church, despite extreme persecution by Roman Caesars and antagonistic Jews, grew and thrived. Jesus explicitly commended the 1st century Smyrna church for its faithfulness amidst tribulation (Revelation 2:8-11). Tertullian once stated, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” (BrainyQuote)

Believers—though “recovering humans” like others—know that we can draw upon God’s help amidst ordeals, enabling a “*peace which surpasses all understanding*” (Philippians 4:7). But how should we comfort unbelievers during times such as these, facilitating community welfare like Esther did?

Pastor Jeff Lyle’s related advice: “**1. Don’t assume that their hour of need is your moment for evangelistic ambush.** [Don’t succumb to] hijacking difficult moments in nonbelievers’ lives [as] an open door for proselytization. Be sensitive to their surface needs [and] seek direction from God ... [Otherwise] you may actually take them backwards in their [openness to] the Gospel. ... **2. Slow down and listen intently.** ... Avoid turning [nonbelievers’] emotional words into an argument, especially when they need to know that you are a safe place for them to express their struggle or confusion about what is happening. ...

“3. Offer them objective hope. ... Look for ways to gently share how God has come alongside you in your own times of heartbreak, doubt or pain. ... *All humans share one thing in common: we have all known pain and suffering on some level.* Connect with them as a fellow human and offer them true compassion. ... **4. Remember that there is only one Savior (and He is not you).** You likely cannot fix their dilemma. ... Their fear will not magically disappear simply because you care for them. Jesus ultimately has to do the heavy lifting in times of struggle. ... God will use you in those lives, and this is contingent more so on your *availability* than your *ability*. ... [Be] intentionally loving, relationally sensitive, and sincerely compassionate.”

Widespread crises present opportunities to represent Jesus among others supportively and winsomely. Again quoting Mordecai: “*Who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?*” (Esther 4:14).

QUESTIONS

We have a personal relationship with God in Christ to comfort and guide us. But how can we encourage others who don't know Christ within scary circumstances like the current pandemic? What are some of the worst things we can do when engaging fearful or discouraged unbelievers?

PRAYERS FOR FOR HIS CHILDREN

Please pray that God will continue to bring individuals and churches alongside the FHC ministry, to ensure that For His Children can continue to care for hurting children who need love and care.

Sources

- Peter Pett's quote is from <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/pet/ruth-1.html>.
- Steve Gregg's paraphrased teaching is from his radio show (AM 740, 2-3 PM PST, weekdays) and web site (<https://www.thenarrowpath.com/>) of the same name, the Narrow Path.
- Tertullian's quote can be found at www.brainyquote.com/quotes/tertullian_154818.
- Jeff Lyle's quotes are from www.crosswalk.com/church/pastors-or-leadership/what-can-we-say-to-non-believers-going-through-hard-times.html

