

1st October 2006 Esther 5+6 and Communion.

We pick up the story where Julie left it for us last week – but incase you weren't here or your memory is as poor as mine- we'll recap!

King Xerxes is on the throne and married to Esther. He chose to take Esther for his wife because we're told she was "lovely in form and features" and she pleased him more than any of the other concubines. Actually we're told that she found favour with *everyone* she met. She's also a Jew- although at present King Xerxes doesn't know this.

Xerxes is known for being somewhat of a foolish King who makes grand and sweeping gestures fairly regularly and does not think much about the consequences. He relies heavily on his Royal Advisors. One of whom is named Haman. Haman is an Agagite descended from the Amalekites – Amalekites being Israel's number 1 enemy. He hates the Jews and in chapter 3 managed to persuade the King to decree that the Jewish people must be destroyed.

Chapter 4 last week outlined by Julie tells of Queen Esther hearing of the plot via Mordecai (also a Jew, Esther's cousin and in effect her foster father) and a man who was particularly hated by Haman.

They decided between them that there would be 3 days of fasting by the Jewish people, then Esther would approach the King – an incredibly dangerous thing to do if you were not invited and which could easily cost her her life, in order to beg for mercy for herself and for the Jewish people.

And that's where we're up to! It's very exciting!

### **Read Esther 5 and 6.**

Let me tell you a joke! Traditionally this joke is told at the expense of either Rabbis or of the Irish! But we'll laugh at ourselves today instead. You may know it apologies if you do.

There was a baptist called Jim. He was a good strong christian, read his bible daily, went to church, loved all people. He lived a happy and contented life.

One day the place where he lived fell victim to terrible rain storms. The rain just kept coming and coming. Jim was involved with helping his neighbours put down sandbags and other flood defences, but the water just kept rising. Gradually people began to leave the area. Many cars were unable to cope with the rising water. One of Jim's neighbours though had a 4x4 and the neighbour called by on his way out of town and said "Jim it's no good we're leaving. Can we give you a lift up to the higher ground?"

Jim said – no no but thank you for the offer. It's kind of you to think of me, but I believe God will save me. He rejoiced at this opportunity to witness to his neighbours.

A few days later the water was still rising and there was barely anyone left in Jim's village. Things had got so bad that rescue dinghy's were sent in. One stopped by Jim's house where by now he'd been driven upstairs.

"Hello there the boat driver shouted through the window. Come on get in!"

Jim said – "Thank you kindly for your offer of help, but you see – I'm a christian and I believe God will save me from these flood waters"

A week later – the water continued to rise and Jim was in a terrible state. Beginning now to run out of provisions and the stinking water level now over the upstairs landing.

Helicopter rescue was finally drafted in for the last few people who had refused to leave their homes. They called down for Jim – We're lowering down the line.

Jim said “ No no- Thank you, but I believe in a God of miracles and I believe that God will save me in His time and in His way”

A few days later – cold and dehydrated, Jim died.

And of course he went to Heaven. And God greeted him and said “Jim, my child, it is good to see you, but I had not expected you so soon”

Jim said well God – it's good to see you too, but I hardly think you can say you didn't expect to see me. Surely you know all things and knew exactly what would happen when the flood came- I don't mean to be cheeky Lord, but **where WERE** you?

And God said “Where was I Jim? I was in the 4x4, the rescue boat and even the helicopter I sent! Where were you?”

It's a very old joke- but it rings true doesn't it.

We're talking about the providence of God, the way he intervenes in our world and provides, even in the most unexpected way.

The first and possibly most important thing for us to grasp in this passage is that God is Sovereign. And that because Esther and Mordecai trusted in that sovereignty, God was able to do amazing things through them.

They fasted didn't they for 3 days- they recognised that everything looked really bad and that they needed to express their dependence on God and helplessness in the situation. But they didn't JUST fast and pray. They fasted and prayed and then on the 3rd day of the fast Esther went into the inner court of the palace. Fulfilling her promise from the end of chapter 4

“I will go to the King even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish.”

They fasted and prayed and then they acted. But they didn't KNOW that God would come through for them. They, Esther particularly, trusted in God's sovereignty.

And in that I'm reminded of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in the book of Daniel. They said- upon being thrown into the furnace – Dan 3:17

“If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand. But even if He does not, we want you to know O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the idols you have created”

Sometimes when we step out for God, we ask for a cast iron guarantee that all will be well. We say we want to be sure, we ask for confirmation. And sometimes perhaps that's right. But at other times, like for Esther, God calls us to do it anyway and trust.

Not many of us are asked to do things which may result in our death. Very few of us will ever have to say “If I perish, I perish”. But thousands of our Christian brothers and sisters do face that reality every day. And yet they stand firm, declaring in God who IS ABLE to save them, but EVEN if HE does not, still standing firm anyway.

Rob Crouch is going again to Burma shortly, leading a medical team. This is a hugely dangerous work. He says he'd be quite happy if God told him not to go. But so far God seems to be paving the way, so he's going. Rob has no guarantees that all will be well. Praise God it was last time and we pray it will be again. But nothing is certain.

And it wasn't certain for Esther and yet she went and stood in the inner court. How petrified she must have been. Would this be her last few minutes alive?

And then the King holds out his gold sceptre – the indication that she may approach him. Phew! And then he says the fabulous words “What is it Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half my Kingdom, it will be given you?” So here he goes again with grand, exaggerated statements, but the fact is he's open to whatever she may ask. She then goes on to use her cunning and wisdom and some clever phrasiology so that he's almost committed to fulfilling her request before he knows what it is.

The Jews prayed, fasted and God heard and began to intervene and show his providence in amazing ways – which we'll come to in a second.

But before that I just want to pose a question of what we do when God asks us to step out. The Jews prayed, fasted and then acted. There's a phrase “Pray as if it ALL depended on God, then work as if it all depended on you.” And there are flaws with that philosophy, but in essence it says pray like mad and then do the best you can with what God gives you. And I think that's borne out by these events in Esther. Sometimes we pray really hard, but we do nothing. Like Jim in the flood story! Sometimes we work really hard in our own strength, and forget to pray much at all. And as for fasting- many of us don't do we?

Let's be challenged to step out for God when he asks us to. Whether it be in talking to a friend about Jesus, whether it be standing up for someone who's being given a hard time at work or school, whether it be doing something new for God which is really scary. Whatever it is. Esther said “If I perish, I perish”, maybe we need to say “if they laugh, they laugh” or “if it costs, it costs” – pray, fast and then do it, trusting in God's providence.

So we need to look at **how** God intervened for Esther. And he does this brilliantly - We're going to look at the apparent “coincidences” which follow.

But first we need to fill in a couple of gaps. Basically the King and Haman go to the first banquet. And once again the King says to Esther “what do you want? – you can have up to half my kingdom” And this is where she cleverly says very politely and adhering to all the etiquette of the day that if he is willing to grant her request, then he and Haman should come to another banquet tomorrow. And the King agrees.

Haman, after having a private dinner with the King and Queen leaves the palace feeling very pleased with himself until he sees Mordecai at the King's gate and is so upset by his mere existence that he decides to have gallows built and resolves to ask the king to let Mordecai be hanged the next day.

So it feels as though, Esther is too late, has wasted too much time with these 2 banquets and that it all looks pretty bad for Mordecai- but then in chapter 6 (to quote Frederic Bush – who wrote a commentary on Esther) “Haman’s plan runs headlong into the providence of God” !!

Esther 6:1

We’re told (coincidence 1) that the King could not sleep that night

So he just happened (coincidence 2) to ask for the book of the chronicles (or record of court events over the past few days) to be read to him.

And his servants just happened to read the section (which we heard about in Esther 2) about Mordecai exposing a plot to assassinate the King. Now had Xerxes been slumbering sweetly that night he might have never heard about this but in hearing of it immediately asks whether or not Mordecai was rewarded for this.

And his servants declare that he wasn’t. (Coincidence 3)

We know that Xerxes is loathed to make decisions without gaining advice and at that moment when he asks “who is in the court?” to give him counsel, it just so happens (coincidence 4) that Haman walks in!

Now we don’t know what time it was, but if the King couldn’t sleep it must be very early in the morning. So why is Haman there? Because of his eagerness to see Mordecai hang, he is there bright and early! So that’s coincidence 4!

And (so coincidence 5) it just so happens that the king goes about asking how he should honour Mordecai without ever referring to him by name. “What should be done for the one the king delights to honour?” And Haman in his arrogance and pride assumes, very wrongly that it must surely be himself that the king wants to honour. He doesn’t imagine for a second that the honour is to be bestowed on his worst enemy and even worse that he himself will end up leading the parade.

And in an instant the situation is turned completely on it’s head. Haman walked in that morning at the crack of dawn determined to see Mordecai put to death, but he leaves the palace instead with an order to bestow honour and praise upon him. We’re told he rushes home in grief with his head covered”. Oh dear oh dear!

Haman, a seemingly powerful man who was given high position by the King, given cart blanche to do whatever he liked with the Jewish people, given the King’s signet ring as a symbol of his status doesn’t stand a chance when put up against the providence of God. And as he goes home and tells his wife and friends all about it, they tell him in no uncertain terms that very thing. They see that the tide has turned and that being of Jewish origin (and by inference a worshipper of God) Mordecai will be victorious and that Haman’s days are numbered.

And all because the King couldn’t sleep! (be careful next time you get a touch of insomnia) God’s ways and plans and means of achieving His will are far bigger and more complex than our tiny brains can understand. Even when it looked like it was all over for Mordecai, God turns it around with 1 sleepless night for the King!

But it strikes me there’s one other really important thing to notice here.

Yes these apparent co-incidences are set in motion by the King's sleepless night, but aren't they also fairly heavily dependent upon the pride and lack of humility in Haman.

If Haman had not wanted to kill Mordecai- he would not have been at the palace so early. If Haman had not assumed that "the man the king delights to honour" must surely be himself, he would not have devised such an elaborate spectacle.

Conversely however, we see that Esther and Mordecai humbled themselves in prayer and fasting before the Lord. We see that Esther was careful to be sure that when the plot to assassinate the King was uncovered by Mordecai, that he got the credit for it in the records, rather than her. She was humble and what a good thing she was, as it was this action which enabled him to be honoured by the king.

1 Peter 5:5-6

All of you, clothe yourselves with humility towards one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

6 Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.

There is a warning here. We need to examine ourselves before God. Be willing to reflect on our actions and humble ourselves. We can all become proud, no-one is immune.

And as we come to communion and think of Jesus who humbled himself even to death on a cross. We need to be mindful that none of our achievements or gifts or abilities are worth anything apart from the fact that Jesus was willing to die for us and put us right with God. He did for us what not one of us, the greatest to the least is able to do for ourselves.

Let's spend some time reflecting:

Are there areas in our lives where God is asking us to step out for him. Even if we're not sure how it's all going to work out? Do you need to be reminded that God is sovereign? And that the plans and initiatives of men and women don't stand a chance when they run headlong into the providence of God?

Let's remember the Christians in our world who are persecuted because of their faith. For whom the possibility of death is very real because they worship Jesus and yet – who stand firm.

And do we as we approach communion need to ask God to examine our hearts? To show us where we are proud, where we've got too big for our boots, where we've begun to think **we** are surely the ones who the king delights to honour.

Let's be quiet and think for a few moments.