

Esther the humble Hebrew

Pre-reading – Esther needs to be read in advance of this bible study.

Groups – The sheet at the end of this pack could be given to smaller groups of 3-4 people.

Introduction

The book of Esther is the story of a Jewish orphan who becomes the Queen of the Persia and thwarts a genocide against her people. The book is unique because it never refers to God. Yet God worked so powerfully during this time that Jews still celebrate the events in the festival of Purim.

Esther shows Kingdom Courage by trusting that God is working in her life. The book helps us see how God is working even when we don't see him. This study will look at the story of Esther, discuss what true success looks like and examine what achievement looks like in God's eyes.

Starter question (2 mins)

What is the success you are most proud of?

Esther finds favour

To set the scene, we are in Persia in around 479 BC, when the Jews are living in exile. The King of the Persian Empire had got rid of his queen and was on the look-out for a new one. Esther was an orphan looked after by her cousin Mordecai and, as we'll see, was very beautiful. Mordecai had taken her as his own daughter when her father and mother died.

Read Esther 2:8-10

⁸When the king's order and edict had been proclaimed, many young women were brought to the citadel of Susa and put under the care of Hegai. Esther also was taken to the king's palace and entrusted to Hegai, who had charge of the harem. ⁹She pleased him and won his favour. Immediately he provided her with her beauty treatments and special food. He assigned to her seven female attendants selected from the king's palace and moved her and her attendants into the best place in the harem.

¹⁰Esther had not revealed her nationality and family background, because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) What success did Esther find?
- (2) What was this success based upon?
- (3) What do we have to do, to be viewed as a success?

Esther goes on to be made queen. By modern day standards, this was an awful thing to happen. She was taken away and forced to marry a man who was not one of her own people. But in this situation, she found success and favour with a king, it seems mainly based on her physical appearance.

Esther hid her Jewish identity, maybe out of fear of persecution. Later she will stand up for her people, using the success she had received for God's glory. Esther is one side of this study, a picture of humility even after success. The second character we will look at is Haman, and he is also successful, but he reacts it in a very different way.

Haman finds honour

Read Esther 3:1-4

After these events, King Xerxes honoured Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honour higher than that of all the other nobles. ² All the royal officials at the king's gate knelt down and paid honour to Haman, for the king had commanded this concerning him. But Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honor.

³ Then the royal officials at the king's gate asked Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's command?" ⁴ Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behaviour would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew.

⁵ When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel down or pay him honour, he was enraged. ⁶ Yet having learned who Mordecai's people were, he scorned the idea of killing only Mordecai. Instead Haman looked for a way to destroy all Mordecai's people, the Jews, throughout the whole kingdom of Xerxes.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) What success did Haman find?
- (2) What would kneeling signify for Haman?
- (3) What does Haman want to do because Mordecai didn't kneel?
- (4) Have you ever not received the praise you were due?

The King effectively made Haman the second in command of the country. This was a huge honour and success, but we see quickly that Haman wants something else, he wants the respect and approval of everyone in the palace. The only way he could get this is by everyone kneeling to him.

What is pride?

So, what is pride? Pride is a concentration on self. Pride is constantly calculating how you look and how much you are respected. Everything you do becomes a means to an end, to obtain a more favourable image in other people's eyes. Haman doesn't seem to care about the job he has just received, what he cares about is getting respect and approval.

Pride shows in two ways depending on the outcome of your calculation:

- Firstly, there is a superior pride, when you add up how you're doing and think you are doing well. This leads you to rank yourself above others and begin to look down on them. This is the more obvious pride and is easier to spot in ourselves and others.
- The second pride is more subtle: an inferiority pride. Here, your calculations on how you are perceived and on your own success don't look as good. This is the pride that makes Haman question why Mordecai doesn't kneel. This is the pride that makes you feel bad about yourself, makes you not like how you are doing, how you look.

Both types of these pride will affect our lives at different times.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) In what ways does a pride of superiority show?
- (2) In what ways does a pride of inferiority show?
- (3) How do you take criticism?

The deadliness of pride

The outcome of Haman's pride is a plot to commit genocide! Haman's pride spins fast out of control and becomes deadly. Pride is a deadly trap we can all fall into and is normally behind a lot of the bad things we do.

Pride also fills you with bitterness and anger. If you believe yourself superior to others you will quickly become annoyed with them as think you know better than them. If you feel inferior to others you will grow bitter quickly as the world doesn't go the way you want it to do, and you become paralysed with fear. This belief that you deserve better than what you have received is at the root of a lot of problems in our society.

Pride stops us learning from mistakes, because we either feel superior and dismiss the idea we've made mistakes, or our feelings of inferiority mean any criticism crushes us.

The worst thing about pride is that it conceals itself. Other sins are pretty easy to see, but pride hides itself, with people unaware of it in their lives. A person will say, 'I hate snobs!' or 'I hate intolerant people!', thus placing themselves above a group of people without realising it. This attitude is the outward manifestation of our sinful hearts – pride is the carbon dioxide of sin.

This spiral of pride ultimately ends with us saying that we don't need the God who created us, that we are fine by ourselves. This issue of pride is therefore an issue of life and death, just as it was for Esther and Haman.

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) Honestly, as you have gone through this study have you been thinking "pride affects other people more than me"?
- (2) Are there any particular areas of your life you feel you are proud in? (work, family, relationships, money etc)
- (3) In what areas of your life do you not allow God to be sovereign?

Cure for pride

So if pride is this deadly, why don't we talk about it more?

The story of Esther continues. Haman has decided to kill Mordecai and goes to the palace to get King Xerxes to sign the death warrant. The problem for Haman is that Xerxes had a restless night. The king decided to look at the records and this reminded him that Mordecai had saved his life and he hadn't honoured Mordecai.

Read Esther 6:4-10

⁴ The king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the palace to speak to the king about impaling Mordecai on the pole he had set up for him.

⁵ His attendants answered, "Haman is standing in the court."

"Bring him in," the king ordered.

⁶ When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?"

Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honour than me?" ⁷ So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honour, ⁸ have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. ⁹ Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honour, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"

¹⁰ *“Go at once,” the king commanded Haman. “Get the robe and the horse and do just as you have suggested for Mordecai the Jew.*

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) How does Haman feel at the start and end of these verses?
- (2) What would the royal robe say about the relationship with the king?
- (3) What other stories in the Bible talk about the humble being exalted?
- (4) Are humble people often exalted in our modern world?

As Jesus said (Luke 14:11), all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. This isn't generally our experience in this world, but it shows a glimpse of God's will for our lives, and the future when he remakes the world.

Haman shows that more than anything he wants the king to approve of him and for everyone to know that. He wants ultimate approval, and he looks to the ultimate authority to provide that. He stumbles onto something really profound, a want that we all share: the desire to receive the ultimate approval and reassurance that we are a success. The problem was that he looked to the wrong king. We need desire to be met, and it is only met in Jesus.

Haman's fortunes take a dramatic turn as he loses the king's favour, but this change was far greater for Jesus. He came from the glory of heaven to earth and was stripped of clothes, of dignity and of His father's favour. Then He clothes us with God's favour and puts us off the 'horse', in the place of honour, where we receive the ultimate confirmation of our value.

Jesus had to die for you, so you can never feel superior, but He also was glad to die, meaning you can never think you are worth nothing. Jesus loved you in such a way that there is a cure to pride, both superior and inferior.

This allows us to live our life in gratitude for this act. Giving up our pride and living humble lives, waiting for the day when Jesus comes and exalts us on the last day, just as the Queen Esther did.

Read Esther 7:1-4

So the king and Haman went to Queen Esther's banquet, 2 and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, "Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted."

3 Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favour with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. 4 For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king."

Questions (5 mins)

- (1) How did Esther humble herself for her people?
- (2) What does this achieve?
- (3) Where in our lives can we humble ourselves as Esther did?

In a book that doesn't mention God, by the end of the story your eyes are still drawn to Him. You can see the way God works through imperfect situations, and how He humbles the proud, and exalts the humble. We see that success in God's eyes is found by humbling ourselves.

Response (15 minutes)

Pray for each member of the group.

You may consider praying into:

- Feelings of superiority
- Feelings of inferiority.
- Revelation of Jesus' humility on the cross.

Esther the humble Hebrew – Group Handout

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Questions

Introduction (2 minutes)

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Esther finds favour (Esther 2:8-10) (5 minutes)

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Haman finds honour (Esther 3:1-4) (5 minutes)

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What is pride? (5 minutes)

- (1) In what ways does a pride of superiority show?
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The deadliness of pride (5 minutes)

- (1) As you have gone through this study have you been thinking "pride affects other people more than me"?
- (2) Are there any areas of your life you feel you are proud in? (work, family, relationships, money...)
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Cure for pride

Esther 6:4-10 (5 minutes)

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Bible passages

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