

ROLLING HILLS COMMUNITY CHURCH

Esther • The Backstory • Esther 1:1-2:23 • 04/08/2018

Main Point

God's blessing and favor on our lives is meant to be a source of hope and deliverance for others.

Introduction

As your group time begins, use this section to introduce the topic of discussion.

When people use the word “blessed” to describe their lives, what do you think they mean?

What is one area of your life where you feel particularly blessed?

Typically when we use the word “blessed,” we are describing our perception of God's favor in our lives. Blessed can be defined as favor as a demonstrated delight. If you are said to have God's favor, you would be seeing the tangible evidence of God's approval in your life. This is one of the themes in the Book of Esther. As God blesses us and pours out His favor on our lives, it's for a purpose much larger than ourselves.

Understanding

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

| Have a volunteer read Esther 1:1-5,10-13.

Would you say King Ahasuerus had received God's favor? Explain.

How would you describe the king's response to the earthly blessings he had received (i.e. grateful, unsatisfied, preferred the favor of men, braggadocious, etc.)?

Why did the king become so angry with Queen Vashti?

Ahasuerus was looking to show off his wealth and fame in order to win the favor of his military personnel, nobles, princes, and commoners—all in hopes of attacking and going to war against Greece. Rather than being filled with gratitude to God for the favor He had shown him as king, Ahasuerus was hungry for the approval of men. When Vashti's refusal stopped that madness, Ahasuerus became enraged. When we believe we are deserving of God's favor, lord it over others, or seek the favor of men instead, we misunderstand the point of God's blessings altogether.

How can we guard against becoming self-absorbed with God's blessings and favor?

Have a volunteer read Esther 1:13–2:7, then read Esther 2:8-9a,15-18.

Contrast the favor of Ahasuerus with the favor Esther received. In your judgment, what was the main difference?

For what stated reasons did Esther find favor in the eyes of the king?

What are some characteristics in people today that typically find favor among people in the world? Ultimately, why does God give us physical qualities and personalities that draw other people to us?

If you didn't know the end of the story already, what reasons might you guess that Esther was elevated in favor among pagan people? What does this tell you about why God gives us favor in the world today?

Esther stood out, but she didn't demand it. While Ahasuerus pushed to gain favor among men, Esther was favored by God's design. God can use imperfect people in just the right time and in just the right way to accomplish what only He can do. His favor in our lives is not meant for us to end with our own good feelings about ourselves and our circumstances.

Have a volunteer read 2 Corinthians 9:8-11.

This passage speaks specifically to God's favor in our finances. How does it also speak to you about God's purpose in favoring you in every way?

For what reasons does Paul specifically name for God's favor in our lives?

How is the generosity here different from the type of generosity Ahasuerus showed in his lengthy celebrations?

God is the giver of every good thing. Our abilities and finances are from God, and they are meant to be used to glorify Him. Ultimately, God favors us for His righteousness so that our gratitude would overflow to others.

When have you experienced the truth of the statement, "Doing right is its own reward"?

On a scale of 1 to 10, how important of a factor is the underlying motivation for your words and actions? Do you take into account your motivations before doing or saying something?

Explain.

If the prize of my pursuit is Jesus, then He becomes the lens through which I view and interact with my world. If the prize of my pursuit is wealth, fame, or anything other than Jesus, then I will never be satisfied and will never know what it means to be content. Pride and prejudice are destructive motivations that must be dealt with.

| Have a volunteer read Esther 2:19-23:

What secret things took place in these verses?

What motivations or possible motivations were revealed in the secret of Esther? Mordecai? The king's eunuchs?

Which of the secrets came to light? What was the result?

Respond to the following statement: "Evil and wrongdoing will reap what is sown."

This section of the story sets the stage for the next. Mordecai likely had some sort of official position or duty that would allow him to sit at the King's Gate. As he was there, he discovered the conspiracy to kill the king. Passing this information along to Esther, Mordecai stood to gain favor for himself and for Esther, who passed the information along and saved the life of the king. Whatever Mordecai's motivation was for reporting the conspiracy, the eunuchs who plotted against the king's life lost their own.

Application

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

Here are three things we must remember to gain favor like Esther: the true source of favor is God Himself, winning favor is something we do rather than something that is done to us, and God chooses to grant us favor and blessing so that we will be a source of hope and blessing to others. Which of these three do you need to put into practice the most right now? How can this group help you in that?

How are you using the favor God has given you to be a blessing of hope to others? What are you going to do with it?

Pray

Thank God for His favor in your life. Ask Him to continually remind you that His favor is meant for the glory of His great name.

Commentary

| Esther 1:1-22

1:1-2. Ahasuerus is the Hebrew name for King Xerxes, who ruled from 486-465 B.C., and who is mentioned only two other times in the rest of the OT (Ezr 4:6; Dan 9:1). Critical scholars regard the statement that Ahasuerus ruled 127 provinces as an error, yet this is not an impossible figure (cp. Dan 6:1). The Persian records speak of "satrapies," which according to various accounts, would number between 20 and 31, but the

term used in this verse is “provinces” (Hb *medinah*), which would be subdivisions of a satrapy. An example of this from Ezra-Nehemiah (see note at Ezr 4:11) would be the division of the satrapy of “Beyond the River” into many provinces, such as Samaria and Yehud (Hb for Judah). The easternmost border of the vast Persian Empire was the Indus River, now in Pakistan but once part of India during the time of the British raj. The westernmost extent of the empire was to Cush, the region south of Egypt called Upper Nubia, which today is part of northern Sudan.

Chapter 1 of Esther is set in the fortress (Hb “*birah*”) at Susa, one of the three capital cities of the Persian Empire along with Ecbatana and Persepolis (some would argue that Babylon was also a capital city). It is located in what is today southwestern Iran and was the capital of the ancient empire of Elam during the second millennium B.C. During Xerxes’ rule Susa was the usual location of his winter palace.

1:3-4. In the third year of Ahasuerus, probably 483 b.c., there occurred the first of 10 feasts recorded in Esther, which are important structural and thematic markers in the book. The word “feast” (Hb “*mishteh*”) is derived from the Hebrew verb “*shathah*,” meaning “to drink.” The “feast” was more of a drinking bout than a meal. The ancient Greek writers mentioned that the Persians were famous (or infamous) for their prodigious drinking.

1:5-8. Unlike the first feast, the second banquet (or “feast,” v. 3; Hb “*mishteh*”) was not for the nobility but for all the citizenry in the fortress of Susa. The event is described in great detail (v. 6) to highlight the opulence and wealth of the king. For the Persians, it must have been regarded as a fabulous party because the royal wine flowed freely, according to the king’s bounty (lit “according to the hand of the king”). Moreover, by royal decree each guest could drink as much as he desired or was capable of drinking since no restraint was placed on the drinking (lit “as to the law [Hb “*dath*”] of the drinking, no restraint”).

1:9. The third feast was given by Queen Vashti, who is first introduced in this verse, and it was only for the women. Both biblical and extrabiblical sources demonstrate that women were often present at the feasts, but their presence was not mentioned at the two earlier feasts (vv. 3,5). Neither Persian nor Greek records mention a queen named Vashti, but rather identify Amestris as queen during Xerxes’ reign. Most critical scholars regard the reference to Vashti as a historical blunder on the part of the author of Esther. However, several prominent OT scholars suggest that Vashti may be not a proper name but a title, possibly related to the Avestan (ancient Indo-Iranian language) *Vahishta*, meaning “the best.” Vashti disappears from the story when she is replaced by Esther (Esther 2:17).

1:10-12. Jewish readers who were well versed in the Scriptures would probably recognize the ominous mention of feeling good from the wine. King Belshazzar was also “under the influence of the wine” (Dan 5:2) when he literally saw the writing on the wall. Most of the references to eunuchs in the OT occur in the book of Esther. They held positions of power, such as serving as cupbearer, and could be trusted with the care of the royal wives and concubines. Three of the names listed for the eunuchs (Mehuman, Biztha...Carkas) have parallels with names found in the Elamite Persepolis texts (E. Yamauchi, *Persia and the*

Bible). The king's call for seven eunuchs could suggest that Queen Vashti was carried to the banquet on a royal litter. No one was as shocked as King Ahasuerus when Queen Vashti refused his royal command. Ahasuerus's intense fury was predictable. His own wife had publicly disobeyed the most powerful man in the Persian Empire. The chronology of this event may give additional insight into the king's anger. If this occurred in "the third year" of Ahasuerus's rule (483 b.c.), it might coincide with the preparations for war with the Greeks. Ahasuerus needed his men to obey his commands as they went to war, but in his own palace he could not even get his own wife to obey.

1:13-14. Some suggest the phrase who understood the times refers to astrologers and translate the phrase as "who understood propitious times." However, the answer from these wise men does not mention the stars or the zodiac. More likely the reference to those who "understood the times" is like the usage in 1Ch 12:32 in which the men of Issachar "understood the times," that is, they were simply wise men. The names of the seven wise men, also called officials (Hb "sarim"), are not identifiable with known Persian individuals, but for three of the men (Meres, Marsena, and Memucan), Elamite parallels have been found for their names (Yamauchi).

1:16. Memucan's recommendation (vv. 19-20) was based on his assertion that Queen Vashti's action was not just a personal affront but also a universal affront against all (Hb "kol") the officials and all (Hb "kol") the peoples who lived in all (Hb "kol") the provinces. Memucan's exaggeration served only to legitimize the poor advice he was about to give the king.

1:18. The syntax of the Hebrew text of verse 18 is difficult because there is no object for the verb "they will say" (Hb "to'marna"). One simple solution is to assume the loss of a definite article marker (Hb "'eth") before the phrase who hear. This would give a translation such as "the noble women of Persia and Media will say what they have heard about the queen's act."

1:19. The irrevocability of the laws of Persia and Media is not documented either in Persian or Greek literature, although it is mentioned several times in the OT (8:8; Dan 6:8,12). Some scholars regard this as an historical inaccuracy on the part of the author, thinking that it would be impossible to run a government by such a principle. The meaning here is that the decision should be incorporated among official decisions so that it will be strictly carried out. The consort was always called "Queen Vashti" until this verse; now she is simply "Vashti."

1:20. This passage is replete with irony and satire. King Ahasuerus, who could not control his own wife, now issues a universal decree that all women would honor their husbands.

1:22. The final phrase of the decree is unusual and has engendered much debate: and speak in the language of his own people. Some scholars suggest changing the text, while others follow the LXX and simply delete it (NRSV, NLT). Another possibility is to understand the phrase "speak in the language of the people" as referring to the decree and not to the husband. The issuance of the decree to the entire empire is ironic

because it ensured that everyone in the empire would know about the king's marital struggles, and not just the "noble women" of Susa (v. 18).

| Esther 2:1-18

Xerxes, at his attendants' advice, ordered a search for Vashti's successor. The narrator revealed Esther's nationality by first identifying Mordecai's lineage as a Benjamite of the family of Kish. Mordecai was Esther's foster parent and elder cousin. Esther ("Hadassah," her Hebrew name) was among those brought to the king's palace because of her exceptional beauty. At Mordecai's advice she concealed her nationality, a factor that figured in her advantage over the enemy Haman.

One year of purification was required for an audience with the king. Esther was received by the king four years after the deposition of Vashti (479 b.c.; 2:16; 1:3). She won his approval and became queen. The western expedition against the Greeks by Xerxes' Persian ships ended in disaster at Salamis in 481 b.c. His selection of Esther occurred after this debacle.

Mordecai, who may have been in the king's service as a gatekeeper, discovered a plot to kill Xerxes (perhaps because of disaffection over his losses at Salamis). The two culprits were hanged on gallows, and Mordecai's heroism was recorded. From this incident Mordecai learned of Esther's new power at court. The concealment of her identity and the record of Mordecai's deed would lead to Haman's eventual undoing (6:1-2; 7:3-6). The traitors' gallows anticipated Haman's own death for the same crime of treachery (7:10).

| ESTHER 2:19-23

2:19. It may be that the young women of the king's harem (vv. 12-14) were not allowed to be present at "Esther's Banquet" but got together at a different time to celebrate with their friend who was now queen. The mention of Mordecai at the King's Gate suggests that he was some kind of official in the Persian court. This would help explain why he was living in the fortress at Susa (1:2) and not in the city of Susa, and how he could be within earshot of conspirators who were plotting Ahasuerus's murder. The King's Gate in Susa was a massive monumental structure that measured 131 feet by 92 feet, with a column-like tower on each corner that was 40 feet high.

2:21-23. The story of Esther takes a new turn with Mordecai's discovery of a plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus. Mordecai informed the king through Queen Esther. Esther not only was Mordecai's best contact with the king, but her passing on of the news would have endeared her to the king. In terms of the narrative, this section of the story sets the stage for the delayed honoring of Mordecai at Haman's expense (chaps. 6-7). The seemingly mundane mention of the incident being recorded in the Historical Record serves as an important part of the plot, setting up Ahasuerus's later discovery of his failure to honor Mordecai (6:1-3).