

A Feast for Hope

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[0 : 0 0] Hey everyone, I'd like to add my welcome to Jonathan's. Before we start looking at this next episode of Esther, let me pray. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word, and I pray that in this time this afternoon you would teach us and train us by it.

I pray that the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts would be pleasing in your sight. I pray that through our reflections on this bit of Esther, you would help us to grow and point us towards Jesus. Amen.

So, is God still there? That's the question that the book of Esther has been asking. In our first two installments, we've seen that although things look really bad, God is still there.

Nevertheless, although he is there, the power of the world and the power of evil seem to be growing, casting a rather long shadow over God's people.

We've had two feasts so far, a feast for power and a feast for evil. In our third episode, we're invited to a feast for hope. And in many ways, what happens in episode three lies at the heart of this book.

[1 : 1 2] The beating heart of Esther is the hope that God's people can have, even when it seems like he's not there. And the chief hope of God's people, as we're going to see, is in his son, Jesus Christ.

What we're going to see is that in the feast for hope, is that Esther's story is full of hope, and that hope is very much pointing forward to Christ. Now, I've been calling each talk or each section an episode, so I think that a Star Wars reference is long overdue.

This is a really nerdy illustration, so I apologize. So George Lucas originally envisioned each episode as having a poetic quality and said that they were supposed to rhyme.

So themes and ideas in Star Wars come up again and again. What looks like repetition is, in fact, the development of a theme. Examples. Examples. Anakin loses his hand.

His son Luke loses his hand. Luke, or Anakin is tempted by the dark side and falls. Luke is tempted by the dark side and he triumphs. I said it was nerdy, but you get the picture. The Bible story, in a way, is a bit like that.

[2 : 2 1] It's poetic in the way the story develops. The stories often rhyme. So we saw last week, for example, how the growing power of Haman has its roots all the way back in the Garden of Eden and the very first act of evil on earth.

We also saw how the power of evil continues in the world and that we face the very same enemy, the devil, that God's people have always faced. The stories are connected.

They rhyme together as part of a bigger story. A bigger story which we happen to be a part of. And so when we come to the Old Testament, we often see patterns that are pointing forward.

In the case of this episode, patterns of hope. And these patterns are all pointing beyond themselves to Jesus. Jesus told his disciples as much whenever he rose from the dead.

They didn't realize this. So Jesus had to tell them that all of the Old Testament, which was their whole Bible, was about him. And so as we look at episode three, we're going to see patterns of hope which look beyond themselves and rhyme with what Jesus did whenever he came.

- [3 : 32] Because ultimately what the story of Esther does is it points beyond itself to an even fuller expression of hope, which we find in Jesus. We've got three points this afternoon, and our three points are three horizons.

Death on the horizon, hope on the horizon, and despair on the horizon. And as we look at these three horizons, as they appear in the story, the thread that runs through all of them is a thread of hope.

Subject three begins with death on the horizon, because as chapter four develops, it becomes very clear that Esther may be required to die, and her choice depends on her willingness to accept that fate.

The cliffhanger we finished on last week was the king in Haman, toasting Haman's planned genocide of God's people. And so where we pick up this afternoon is Mordecai's tormented response.

We're told in verse one of chapter four, when Mordecai learned all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.

- [4 : 42] And many other Jews across the empire were doing this. To put on sackcloth and ashes was part of a shared visual language for grief in this part of the world at that time.

We see it throughout the Old Testament, and the Persians would have done it too. And Mordecai here has very good reason to grieve, I think we'd agree. His whole people have just been handed a death sentence.

The Jews are waiting in an elevator for the gallows. So he comes to the king's gate, but he can come no further because of what he's wearing. And the rest of this chapter is then composed of a kind of back and forth dialogue between Esther and Mordecai through one of Esther's trusted eunuchs, Hatak.

First, Esther has no conception of the depth of Mordecai's grief. Clearly she hasn't heard the edict calling for the annihilation of her people.

She tries to get him to change, but he refuses. His heart is absolutely cracked. So he tells Hatak everything that's happened to him. After all, it was his refusal to bow before Haman that gave the enemy the impetus to destroy God's people.

- [5 : 52] His grief here, however, is not regret. It's important to note. His grief is that death is on the horizon for all of God's people in Persia and beyond. So Hatak, who rather takes on the role of carrier pigeon, brings this information to Esther along with a copy of the edict which called for the genocide.

And he brings Mordecai's solution which uncomfortably rests very much with her. Halfway through verse eight, it says, he told him to instruct her to go into the king's presence, to beg for mercy and plead with him for the people.

Now Esther's not so keen on this. So she sends Hatak back to tell Mordecai that he should know better than to ask her to do that. Because everyone knows that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned, the king has but one law, that they be put to death unless the king extends the gold scepter to them and spares their lives.

Archaeological finds from ancient Persia show that a soldier with an axe would have been standing behind the king's throne for just such a reason. So you can see why Esther's not really that keen on doing this.

Not only that, but she adds that 30 days have passed since she was called to go to the king. And you can kind of hear the fear in her voice, can't you? You want to expect that the king is not going without sexual pleasure and clearly it's not coming from Esther.

[7 : 24] So this is maybe not a good time for her to barge into the throne room. For all Esther knows, Xerxes could just dispense with her. After all, he did dispense with Vashti.

But Mordecai's response, however, cuts across Esther's fear and cowardice. I think it's quite a chilling response, really, but it underlines what's at stake and gestures towards the fact that God is very much present.

This is what he says in verse 13. Do not think that because you're in the king's house, you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place.

But you and your father's family will perish. And who knows, but you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. There's a number of things that we should note here.

Mordecai makes it clear that Esther will not be able to escape the fate of God's people. We've noted in previous weeks that Esther has hidden her Jewish identity, mostly at Mordecai's insistence.

[8 : 32] Mordecai is now telling her that this policy will not save her. Silence in this case is very far from golden. Because if she remains silent, deliverance will come from another place.

Mordecai is convinced that God's people will be delivered. It may only be a remnant, but God's people will not be left without any help.

And he has quite good backing for his faith. Throughout the Bible story, God never abandons his people. We said at the start that the Bible story is full of patterns of hope.

Mordecai presumably remembers the Exodus when God saved his people after 400 years of slavery in Egypt. Mordecai remembers the stories of the judges and the kings when God raised up men and women to defeat Israel's enemies and protect his people.

Mordecai remembers God's promises to Abraham that he would bless him and make him into a great nation as numerous as the sand on the shore and the stars of the sky. And so these patterns of hope in the past give Mordecai hope in the present that God will continue to deliver his people from danger.

[9 : 48] But what he adds to that is quite ominous. Esther, if you're silent, he says, you and your father's family will perish and will not experience that deliverance.

Why? Because she will have abandoned God's people comprehensively and refuse to stand with God and use her position to save her people. She will be not just in the world but very much of the world, complicit with the schemes of evil through inaction, fear, and ultimately silence.

So God's deliverance is certain. The patterns of hope in the Bible story convince Mordecai of that, and rightly so. But against the backdrop of certain deliverance, Esther has a choice to make.

And that decision, that choice, is paramount. So here's a fun fact. It's estimated that the average adult makes around 35,000 conscious choices a day.

Obviously, most of these 35,000 choices probably don't impact our lives terribly hugely. But sometimes, of course, there are particularly big decisions that we have to make, aren't there?

[10 : 59] Very rarely, though, do our choices impact all of God's people. Esther's choice here is unenviable. But her decision that she does make is also remarkable, I think. After years of ignoring and hiding her Jewish identity, she's now ready to stand with God and with his people.

Here's her reply from verse 16. Go, gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my attendants will do as you do.

When this is done, I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish. So Esther has completely turned 180 degrees.

I don't doubt that she was still scared. Nevertheless, she is now ready to die for God's people. That's quite staggering, I think. She also recognizes the need to come before God.

She calls a fast which we can assume was accompanied by heartfelt prayer. Not only does she recognize the need to come before God, she recognizes who her people are.

[12 : 11] The image of all the Jews in Susa fasting and calling out to God for deliverance, I think it's quite a powerful picture of what it means to be part of God's people. A community united in love for God and hope in God, even when he seems silent.

If I perish, I perish, Esther says. It's quite interesting. It's the same word as the word I used earlier in verse 8, which is translated as annihilation. It's just making the point that Esther is really identifying with the suffering of God's people and is ready even to experience that annihilation, that perishing on their behalf in order to save them.

So what we see in chapter 5 then is that in contrast to the death on the horizon that we've seen in chapter 4, we also have hope on the horizon.

And that's us into our second point. The hope that we find in chapter 5 really is the governing idea that the writer of Esther wants to get across. Because through Esther's actions, facing death for her people, hope bursts forth for the people of God.

So three days after the citywide fast, Esther puts on her royal attire and she prepares to face death head on. And the prayers of God's people are answered in the affirmative when Esther stands in the king's court.

[13 : 38] He extends the scepter. Hope rises. But instead of bringing her petition before the king at this point, Esther instead invites the king and Haman to a feast.

A feast for hope. A feast which here symbolizes the hope of God delivering his people from the claws of evil. And whilst this fairly odd threesome of drinking and eating, the king again asks Esther what she really wants.

He may be presented as a moron in much of the narrative, but even he can see that the queen did not risk her life for a party invitation. Nevertheless, Esther continues to bide her time.

I suspect this is probably to win favor with the king to make sure that he is as well disposed to her as possible. Especially given that when she actually brings her request before him, that's going to mean revealing herself to be a Jew.

So she invites the king and the enemy to a further feast the next day. And then she says in verse 8, then I will answer the king's question. Esther's life is mercifully spared, but God's people aren't out of the woods yet.

[14 : 50] What we have here is not yet a victory, but it is an indication and a sign that God hasn't abandoned his people. It's an indication and a sign of hope.

Down by the waterfront in Belfast, where I'm from, there's a sculpture of a woman on a ball, holding out a ring. Most people call it the bell on the ball or the thing with a ring.

Its actual name is Beacon of Hope. Not that you could tell that from the sculpture, but there you go. But for a city that saw a lot of violence during the Troubles, you can see why the council might commission a sculpture with that theme of hope.

And Esther's favor in the sight of the king and her feast are beacons of hope here. Beacons of hope for a people who are looking at facing unimaginable cruelty and violence without the intervention of God.

Mordecai said to her, who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this. What happens when Esther goes to the king who seemed to indicate that Mordecai is right?

[15 : 54] God is still there and he is still working through Esther to bring deliverance. So when we read of Esther being crowned queen for such a time as this, in the context of the whole Bible story and the patterns of hope that we find within it, we discover that Esther's readiness to die anticipates what Jesus would do for his people.

God's people in Persia could trust in the certainty of God's deliverance because of patterns of hope that they had read and seen in the past. And so we can look back to Esther and see a pattern of hope that would eventually find its fullest expression in Jesus.

Because we won't be called upon to die for all of God's people like Esther was. But Jesus was. Esther's decision is a shadow of Christ's decision to die on a Roman cross on behalf of all God's people.

And his decision forms a foundation of hope for all who come and follow him. But how does that hope fare whenever despair is on the horizon?

That's our third and final point because after the hope of Esther's feast, the plans of the enemy very much threatened to undo all of the good work that Esther's feast seems to have done.

[17 : 18] Look at verse nine. Haman went out that day happy and in high spirits. But when he saw Mordecai at the king's gate and observed that he neither rose nor showed fear in his presence, he was filled with rage against Mordecai.

Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home. And then to make himself feel better, he calls his friends and his family round basically so that he can boast about himself. That's what makes the children of the serpent thrive, a chance to talk about their greatness and glorify themselves.

But even talking about his achievements isn't enough to give him satisfaction while Mordecai is still alive. So his family give him this solution. Haman, have a pole set up reaching to a height of 50 cubits, which is really rather high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai impaled on it.

Then go with the king to the banquet and enjoy yourself. Now I'm sure many of us often go to family and friends for advice. If anyone ever gives you advice like this, I think you should probably reconsider your relationship with them.

As for Haman, we're told that this suggestion delighted him and he had the pole set up. And that's where we're going to leave the story. We're going to leave it there hanging under the shadow of a massive stake with Mordecai's name on it.

[18 : 35] So does despair negate hope? I think on the ground, we often feel that it does. Should it? No. Not when one's hope is absolutely certain.

And with God, our hope can be absolutely certain. And here's why. We spoke last week about the enemy behind Haman's evil. The enemy of God's people since the very beginning.

The enemy who tempted mankind to sin and rejection of God. Sin which brought death and judgment to everyone. When Jesus died on the cross, it was to take the punishment for sin and win the victory over evil on behalf of his people who were dead in their sins.

Peter tells us that Christ suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God. God is just and so sin and evil won't go unpunished.

But that's why God himself, in Jesus, died to take the punishment on behalf of his people, on behalf of those who trust him. In the Garden of Gethsemane, just before he was arrested, Jesus said this to his friends, my soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death.

[19 : 52] And he went to pray, blood sweating from his brow, saying, my father, if it's possible, take this cup away from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will. And so Esther was willing to die for God's people.

But Jesus really did. And when we look at Esther, we see really in seed form what Jesus would later do. And so in looking at Esther, we're really being encouraged to look to Jesus who faced death on behalf of you and I.

And not only that, but as Esther was willing to face death, so when we look to Jesus, the Christian is actually encouraged to do the same.

Again, Peter says, therefore, since Christ suffered in his body, arm yourselves also with the same attitude. Because whoever suffers in the body has finished with sin.

Paul says similarly that he wants to know Christ. Yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

[21 : 00] What do these guys mean? Well, Christ died on our behalf. And the Christian is therefore encouraged to take up their own cross as Christ took up his.

To follow the way of Jesus, which, for some believers, really does end in death simply because they stood with Christ. In short, Christ died for us.

Therefore, why should we not be prepared to die for him? As Jesus himself said, whoever acknowledges me before others, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven.

But whoever disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven. So will we, that's the question we're being asked, will we, like Esther, stand with God or will we deny Jesus when death or anything else is on the line?

That is why we labor and strive, says Paul to Timothy, because we have put our hope in the living God who is the Savior of all people and especially of those who believe.

[22 : 07] Our hope is in Jesus. In particular, our hope is in his return and his final defeat of sin, death, and the enemy. Our hope is in his restoration of everything that has been broken.

The hope that Esther brought her people was the hope of life. The hope that Jesus brings is the hope of eternal life. So whether you've been following Jesus for some time or you're not really sure what to make of him, this is the message of hope.

It's not for nothing that those who are in Christ love John 3, 16, a verse in the Bible that says, for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

That's the hope. That's the hope that all believers have and it's rooted firmly in a person. It's rooted firmly in Jesus. Now returning to our story, it looks like Mordecai is going to be dead before Esther can petition the king.

But from what we've seen, it's becoming increasingly clear that God is still there. And if God is still there, hope should not be abandoned. We can lose hope for so many reasons, can't we?

[23 : 26] When illness strikes and the prognosis is bad, we can lose hope. When tragedy strikes and those close to us die, we can lose hope. When life just keeps knocking you down again and again and you feel like you're having to overcome trial after trial, hardship after hardship, it can feel like hope's not there.

Perhaps it's the pandemic and that thought of the long, miserable, and lonely winter is sucking hope from you. Perhaps, perhaps you're just feeling that God isn't there.

What I hope that this episode will teach us is that even in the face of despair, we should and can continue to hope in Jesus. Hope in Jesus doesn't mean that things are always going to go the way that we want them because it's not.

It doesn't mean that we're going to avoid pain. It doesn't mean that we're going to avoid suffering and it definitely doesn't mean that we will avoid death. But the hope of Christ is quite frankly even better because it's the hope of salvation from sin.

It's the hope of an eternal future with Christ. It's the hope of all evil being washed away forever. And so a few thoughts to finish.

[24 : 49] The writer to the Hebrews says that we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. I just think that's a great image, isn't it? Your anchors keep boats secure and anchors a great weight that stops you being blown about by the waves and washed away.

To hope in Christ is an anchor for our soul. And so despair might be on our immediate horizon but our hope in Jesus is on that furthest horizon.

That's where we're going. You might be staring straight at that horizon of pain and despair right now. It might look like a wave that's just going to crash over you and engulf you.

And if you're not or you haven't been in that place in the past it's likely that you will have to face that horizon one day. But what's comforting about Christ is that he is the anchor and he is our hope on that far horizon that's never going to fade.

And so if you set your eyes on Christ despair is not going to engulf you. If you set your eyes on that hope that Jesus brings that hope will keep you going.

[26 : 05] Esther's feast brought hope for God's people in the face of evil. In Christ we have something even more solid than that feast points towards. eternal hope of eternal life with our eternal rescuer.

Our hope is in no one else but Jesus and this hope will never be shaken. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we thank you this afternoon for Christ.

We thank you that the hope that we have in him is eternal it's forever it's absolutely secure and Lord wherever we happen to be this afternoon I pray that you would help us to fix our eyes on Christ the eternal hope that we have in him.

Father I pray that you would blow away those thoughts of despair grief our thoughts of hopelessness that often seek to engulf us and often point us away from Christ.

Father instead remind us of the wonder and the glory and the brilliance of the hope that we have in Jesus and help us to fix our eyes firmly on it. Amen.