

Season 3, Episode 1: Esther: Providence Unwrapped

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Sarah: This podcast is sponsored by 10offthose.com 10offthose.com handpick the best Christian books that point you to Jesus and sell them at discounted prices. I've been really enjoying Seasons of Waiting by Betsy Child's habit this summer. The tagline is Walking by faith when dreams are delayed. Betsy points us to examples of waiting from scripture that teach us how to understand our waiting. I just think it's a great book to read with someone. I think it's a great book to give to someone and tell us we've got it in their store. Why not head there after this episode today.

Felicity: Welcome to two sisters in a cup of tea. My name is Felicity and I live in America and this is my sister Sarah and she is in the UK.

Sarah: Everyone. Hey, Sarah.

Felicity: How are you doing?

Sarah: Well, firstly, is it good to be back?

Felicity: So good. So good. Episode one of season three. Can you believe it?

Sarah: So good to be back. I've got Yorkshire tea in my cup and I've got a milk chocolate oate as my biscuit of choice today, otherwise known as the fake chocolate Hobnob from Little.

Felicity: I was going to say OT. Does sound very like the Hobnob content.

Sarah: I know, but interestingly. Did you watch that program that I linked to you about the secret life of the biscuit? Because Hobnob won a lot of court battles about not being able to copy it, but obviously something happened because Little has definitely copied the Hobnob here. Wow.

Felicity: And they've done a good job. It sounds like it's a good job.

Sarah: It doesn't compare to that pack of Hobnobs that we had over the summer that we demolished within, actually, if you.

Felicity: Remember those with digestive. So that would be why we don't compare.

Sarah: Oh, yes, you're right.

Felicity: Good to know they stuck with you, though. Copies. I have made a big discovery this week on the recommendation of a friend that golden oreos are the American version of the custard cream. I mean, they're round rather than square. There's not quite enough cream in, but it's a pretty impressive version and they're almost as cheap as custard creams.

Sarah: So, all in all, it's a good week, obviously. Tell us 50. For those people who are just tuning into our podcast for the first time, tell us a little bit about who you are.

Felicity: Well, I'm Felicity and I'm living in America and I have two small boys, so the most of the time I am at home with them. And when I'm not doing that, I love to be talking to you and to others about the Bible and that's what this podcast is all about. We love to chat through the Bible, driving it to the heart over a cup of tea and a biscuit, if possible. And just the ordinary, everyday aspect of that, isn't it?

Sarah: Yes.

Felicity: And what about you, Sarah? Do you want to tell us a bit about you?

Sarah: Yes, I'm Sarah, I'm married to David and I have three young children and we currently live in Newcastle, but we will be moving to London in a few weeks, so we're kind of in that chaotic phase of moving life transitions.

Felicity: So this season we are going big because we're going for Esther, which is a big book.

Sarah: It's a big book. It's kind of almost near the middle, would you say, of the Bible. Oh, interesting.

Felicity: I haven't really geographically placed it in my Bible, but yes, quite.

Sarah: I always like to know where I'm going to find Esther. The contents page, as ever, is your friend, if you can't find Esther. It's a big book.

Felicity: It is. And in that it's actually a different genre, isn't it, to the books that we've been talking about before? So we're talking about a narrative here, one big story that goes throughout the whole book. So it's a bit different, and I think it's actually a bit different to what we would naturally choose as a devotional part of the Bible to go to. It's not your natural choice for picking out your top verse to dwell on that day, is it?

Sarah: No. I can't remember the last time that someone kind of quoted Esther to me, a verse from Esther to encourage my heart. Like, it's not got those pithy verses of it, or maybe it has and we've seen them in the same way before. So how do you get stuck into reading this book listie? How has it been for you, trying to get going, reading it in preparation for us having a look at it? Yeah.

Felicity: So I think a big thing has been literally the act of reading it and trying to read it all the way through as many times as possible. And I've been listening to it and reading it and kind of just soaking in it as much as possible. And I think one of the big things has been taking it as a whole story, rather than kind of chunking it up into little parts and trying to deal with that. I think the way that we're going to hear what God is saying to us through Esther is going to be through the whole story arc, rather than kind of chapter one, verse two says this, and chapter three, verse five says that. Has that been your experience? What kind of things have you been doing to get into this?

Sarah: Yes, well, actually, I've taken your advice a couple of seasons ago, you said you like a clicky pencil, and I thought, I'm going to try that this time. So I've got my journal Bible, which I really enjoy, because I think I just feel freedom to mark my Bible. I don't feel precious about it. I just feel like, Right, I'm going to get stuck into this. I've had my highlighters, I have my clicky pencil, and, as you say, I've just been trying to read it and read it and read it and listen to it I turned it on my run the other day. It literally takes half an hour to listen to the whole of Esther. And it's a really good listen. It's a really good read. So that has been generally the way I've just been kind of reading, marking things, coming across different themes or different things that surprise me, different questions I have as I've gone through it, as a way of getting into the story.

Felicity: I think a big part of that. And what we're looking for here, the storyteller. So take note of how the story is being told, because that is a big part of a narrative and this writer is masterful. There is drama and there's humor and there's incredibly just the characters are incredibly well presented. So I think it does sweep you in, and that is down to what the storyteller is doing. So when you've got your clicky or not Pencil, it's funny you remember that because I don't really remember what Pencil was using. So we see the differences between us, but that's kind of noticing what the storyteller the narrator wants us to notice. I think that's the thing. The temptation is that we jump in and we're like, oh, I really noticed that. Esther just seems to make some slightly strange decisions, or is Hayman really as bad as his press? And actually, the narrator gives us a very specific kind of what they are highlighting and what they want us to take note of. So it's important, I think, to note that. But it does mean that these episodes that we're doing are going to be jampacked, aren't they?

Sarah: Yeah. This is not last season. We kind of dwell deeply on James and we kind of took verse by verse, didn't we? And it was punchy and it was straight to the heart. And actually, I think this is just going to be a very different kind of read. And that's good and it's exciting, but also quite challenging. If you're listening along with us, and if you're reading along with a friend, we'd really recommend just having a read of the chapter that we're doing beforehand, just getting a handle on the story, listening to it all the way through, maybe as you go about doing folding your washing or on your way to work, whatever it is, just kind of soaking yourself in the story. Because I think probably it's going to feel quite fast as we run through this, isn't it?

Felicity: Yes. I think that if you're still trying to find your bearings in the story, then it might get a bit confusing. So I think having a handle on the whole story will be really helpful. Talking about whole stories, we need to place it kind of in the whole Bible story. So if I just read the first few verses here. So this is what happened during the time of the Zerksis. The

Zerks, who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Kush at that time, King Zerkse reigned from his royal throne in the city of Susa. And in the third year of his.

Sarah: Reign, he gave a banquet for all.

Felicity: His nobles and officials. Sarah, do you want to give us a bit of a kind of anchor as to where we are?

Sarah: Yeah, sure. So Esther's story takes place in Southeast, and that's the capital of the Persian Empire. And this empire is absolutely massive. It stretches, what does it say, 127 provinces from India to Kush. That is the world in this kind of language in the way that it's being written. So it's huge. During the reign of King Turkeys, he rolled from four eight five to four six four BC. So when Judah fell to Babylon, that's in the Bible timeline, isn't it? That King Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem and took that God's people were taken into exile in Babylon. So that's happened about 100 years ago. Another person came called Cyrus. He then conquered Babylon. He released the exiles to return to their land, but some Jews didn't return straight away, and that includes Esther's family. And we're probably a couple of generations on from the time of the exile itself. So we find Esther and we find her cousin Mordecai. Now, Esther has already been through a traumatic situation. Both her parents have died. We don't get told any more than that, but she's been brought up by her cousin Mordecai. They are in the capital of the Persian Empire, and so they're right in the heart of the kind of heart of the empire, if that makes sense.

Felicity: And this empire, which is very much not of God's people, so God's people are scattered. Many of them have returned to Jerusalem, but others have stayed. But in that as they're staying, they're very much in the minority, aren't they? So Esther and Mordecai and to the extent, actually, that Esther and Mordecai do not reveal their ancestry very easily, it's obviously quite a dangerous thing to be of God's people in the Persian Empire.

Sarah: Yeah, I think it's pretty terrifying for them. They're in a minority, and we'll see why. It's a scary place to be, but that is where they are. We're not called to ask questions, I don't think, in Esther itself as to why they didn't go back, why the family didn't go back with other Jews. This is just where they are. And I think what's exciting, as we even start, Esther is thinking, wow, this is outside of the Promised Land. It's one of the only books that is written out completely outside of the Promised Land, and yet God is at work, even though he's not mentioned at all in the whole story, which is in itself, again, absolutely fascinating. God is absolutely at work and he's showing us that in a story somewhere completely away from the Promised Land, he is working for his people. And that's really exciting. So, Felicity, in terms of that, tell us. So we've got kind of where we are in Bible history, but then we've got another phrase that quite often people can use, which is called salvation history. Can you tell us a bit about what that is and where we are on that timeline?

Felicity: Yeah, so if you think that the line of God's promise that is given to Abraham and then it's ultimately fulfilled in Jesus, and then every part of the Bible kind of fits somewhere in the midst of that. Not just in the midst of that, actually, but after Jesus as well. So the New Testament letters, particularly anything after the Gospels, is after Jesus death, resurrection and ascension. But this book here, while it's happening outside of the Promised Land, geographically, it's not where we'd expect it to be, but God's plan for salvation, his rescue mission through a Messiah is still very much in action. And in the midst of this book, a huge threat comes to God's people through this Persian Empire. And in that threat is the very it seems the possibility that this Messiah rescue plan, this promise of deliverance, could be destroyed, could be wiped out, but from the people of God in the midst of this foreign land. Actually, God is still working out his salvation plan. So we're kind of in the bit before the promise is fulfilled. But Esther and the way in which the drama unfolds here is a key part of that plan unfolding and how it actually does continue and still can be trusted as we move on through the book.

Sarah: Yeah, that's really helpful. So what have you spotted so far in terms of themes that have been popping up as you've been reading and listening?

Felicity: Yeah, one of the big things has just been there's been lots of rising and falling and there's like unexpected kind of rising in the sense that people who seem to be nobodies become somebody and then people who are very much somebody's come crashing down. That's been really noticeable, I think. And then in the midst of that as well, while God is not mentioned, his name is not mentioned, it seems that maybe is he absent from all of this,

what we might see as coincidences happening, which, as you take a step back, you think, this is no coincidence. God is very much at work.

Sarah: What about you? Yeah, I think that it's all over, isn't it? Like, these coincidences are just popping up, like left, right and center in this book. And it's really cool reading it, I think, and trying to spot where God's at work and how the narrator points you to those situations and kind of shows you how if you say they really aren't coincidence, this is exactly in God's plan in order to bring salvation through his people. So I think that's been really fun to spot, I think, just for me. What else? I think, as you're saying in the beginning, just like the way this has been written again. It's really clever. So all the chapters are kind of paired. Chapters one and two mirror nine and ten. Chapter three mirrors eight, and we've got five and seven. And then chapter six is like the pivot. It's like the heart of how the narrative and how the story changes. And I just think that's really cool when you start to see that and unpack that. And I'm really excited about unpacking that as we go through. And I think just the way that we get insight into these characters, I think it's a really exciting read and I'm really looking forward to it.

Felicity: Yeah, I'm so excited about it. And I think I hadn't realized before I spent some time in Esther just how helpful it is to see God at work, seemingly in a world where he is not talked about, he's silenced. There's nothing about God. About the Persian Empire. And yet as we read through this narrative. He's so clearly at work. And just as at the beginnings of how we might drive it to the heart. For us. That is just incredibly reassuring. Because I don't know about you. But it feels often like God is silenced and we're in a world where he is not the big name and all of that kind of thing. So this already only just beginning to get into it already. I feel reassured that our God is in charge and that he is at work, and there's a kind of purposefulness to that in our everyday lives, even though we live in a society, a nation, a place where that doesn't seem to be the thing.

Sarah: Yeah, I think I agree. I think I'm quickly realizing how essential this book is. We feel like it's every season. We're like. Oh. Hablook. Is definitely what everyone should be reading. James oh, definitely. And now you know, oh, Esther, why haven't I been reading this, like, every day, as you say? I think I've been really starting to see that. Well, I think it's going to be interesting in terms of how we drive this to the heart over the season and how different it is to James is the fact that, as we were saying before, there's no kind of specific application points in this letter in this book. Like, it's not a quick and easy do. This kind of application, is it? Actually, driving into the heart most likely will look like a kind of cultivating, a deeper and richer theology of God's sovereign purposes and his character through this book. And that is as much application and that's as much driving to the heart as it is saying, now I need to go and do this to live and kind of grow the Christian. Does that make sense?

Felicity: Yeah, absolutely. Because I think the danger is that we want a really direct application. But then we end up sort of moralizing and saying.

Sarah: Oh. Well.

Felicity: We will be like. Esther in this way. Or we'll be like mordecai or whatever it is. But actually.

Sarah: Yeah.

Felicity: Seeing God in a bigger kind of more sovereign. More trustworthy kind of way. That's going to be at the heart of it. Which is going to mean that every week we're going to have to almost refer to the whole story in order to get there.

Sarah: And I think it also makes again, I think we say this every time, don't we? But it's really good discussing it with someone out here, really appreciating it, but really it is. And I think it's really valuable to do this with such a big sweep of stories. So whether you're listening to this podcast for the first time or whether you've been with us all the way through so far, why not have a think right now? Is there someone you can ask to listen along to Esther together? I just think you'd benefit so much. We are already benefiting from this conversation, and every week in the show notes, we will have questions to dig into over a cup of tea, but just help you on your discussions and as you drive it to the heart for yourselves. And we can't recommend enough the value of sitting down just for 20 minutes with another friend or sister in Christ and saying, let's just open up Esther together.

Felicity: We would love as well if you were to able to write a review for us wherever you listen to your podcast. That would be just brilliant in order to get the word out to as many

people as possible, really at the heart of what we're doing. We just want to get people into the Bible in their everyday lives. And so the more people who know about this, that would be helpful. You think it might be helpful for others. It would be wonderful if you're able to just jot off a quick review for us. We read everyone and it's hugely encouraging to us as much as anything else.

Sarah: And a really helpful time to do it this week while we're still, like, fresh we're beginning of the season, this is the time to kind of get stuck into a new season with us, isn't it? So we'd love that. Flynn, would you like to pray for us as we finish?

Felicity: Yes, absolutely. Father God, we prayed you so much that you are our big, glorious, sovereign God, and we praise you for the book of Esther. Thank you that you show us so clearly who you are in this. And we pray that as we dig into this book together over coming weeks, pray that you will be changing our hearts, that we might know you better and live out who we are in you for your glory. Amen.

Sarah: Amen.

Felicity: Whistlestop whiz as ever, but a joy.

Sarah: Good to be back and really looking forward to it.

Felicity: Me too. All right, well, we better say goodbye for now. And I will munch on my custard cream.

Sarah: Pretend mine's already gone.

Felicity: Oh, okay. Anyway, see you all, hear you all, listen to you, whatever it is. Next time.

Sarah: All right. See you next time. Bye.

Felicity: Bye. Bye.

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