



# EXILED RESILIENCE

**A Community Group Study**

Narrabeen Baptist Church

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## ***WEEK ONE: The Kingdom without the King***

Read Esther: 1:1-8.

Here we see the Persian Empire at its peak. King Xerxes throws a week long party after showing off his royal splendour for six months [history tells us he did this to rally his troops for his desired invasion of Greece].

What do you learn about King Xerxes' kingdom in verses 4-8?

If you were a guest at this party, what would you be thinking about?

The closest thing you or I have ever come to something like this is if you've ever booked a holiday at some luxury resort. You walk in and are amazed at the beauty of the environment, we're greeted with some fancy cocktail, have your bags carried to your room which is way more opulent than anywhere else you've stayed. You kick your heels off and think "This is heaven on earth!"

I would imagine being a guest at this party would rank highly on best experiences one could have. But notice what's missing: there's no mention of God at all. In fact, God isn't mentioned anywhere in the book of Esther (more on that later). The picture we're given in these few verses is what we believe heaven to be like, except heaven without the rule and reign of the King of heaven.

How does this passage reflect the culture we experience on the Northern Beaches at this time in history? Are there any similarities?

Read through this paragraph by journalist John O'Sullivan:

It is often said that we live in a post-Christian society. That is true, but its meaning is generally misunderstood. A post-Christian society is not merely a society in which agnosticism or atheism is the prevailing fundamental belief. It is a society rooted in the history, culture, and practices of Christianity but in which the religious beliefs of Christianity have been either rejected or, worse, forgotten. In other words a post-Christian society is a particular sort of Christian society. At an emotional level, its Christian character explains why many agnostics and atheists nonetheless find Christian hymns suitable and comforting at occasions such as funerals and

weddings. Intellectually, its dormant Christian beliefs — notably those about the nature of Man — underpin our ideas on politics and foreign policy, as for instance on human rights. Even the Enlightenment — which strong secularists like to cite as the foundation of Western liberal polities — is an extension of Christianity as much as a rejection of it. In short, though much of what Christianity taught is forgotten, even unknown, by modern Europeans and Americans, they nonetheless act on its teachings every day.

This statement makes a claim; a simple yet powerful claim. To put his sentiment into a short sentence: We are living in a culture that wants the Kingdom without the King.

What this writer and many others who study culture have noticed is that though we live in a society that is often quick to dismiss Jesus and the church, people nevertheless want the things Jesus provides. Think of all the examples of this happening in the news today. There is an outrage over the treatment of women as “less” than men. We read countless stories about politicians and celebrities being called out for their sexual impropriety, especially against those who are not allowed to have a voice. There is a movement (especially in the US) against those who have treated foreigners as less than human. Whether it’s the call for fair distribution of wealth, advocating for better care of the planet, calling out abuse and greed – these are all values we see in God’s kingdom that Christians have been speaking about for centuries.

This seems like a good thing, doesn’t it? But what happens when people want the things of the Kingdom without the rule of a good, just, loving King?

Read Esther 1:9-22.

Notice the pattern that emerges in this passage.

vv. 1-8: Everything is great. Better than great. So great, in fact, we’re going to show off our greatness to the rest of the world and throw the party of all parties. Everyone will come, eat as much as they want, drink as much as they want and be in awe of this kingdom we’ve built for ourselves. We are the pinnacle of culture.

vv. 9-12: But there is trouble in this kingdom. The Queen doesn’t want to be subjugated and put on display like a trophy. Though this kingdom seems to have everything, there is a serious issue that lies under the surface.

vv. 13-15: Xerxes displays he is NOT a good or even wise king. He certainly doesn’t know how to handle this hiccup. So he consulted “experts” who “understood the times” [this is code for “guys who knew how to keep the kingdom going the way WE want it to go”].

vv. 16-22: A plan is enacted. Vashti is stripped of whatever power and dignity she had. And all the women in the kingdom are punished [this is a kingdom where women are supposed to do whatever the men want]. Xerxes is happy with this idea because it keeps him in power and well, women have even less power (if they had any in the first place). Everyone is happy. Except the women.

When I first read Esther a long time ago, I was taught to believe Vashti was some kind of villain. But if you read through the book, she's actually a hero figure. Why? Because she stands up for what is right even when it cost her everything. This is the whole theme of the book of Esther. It's the same problem Esther encounters later on: will she risk everything, even her own life to stand up for what is right and good? Will she go against the tide of the kingdom?

How do you see our culture embracing the Kingdom without the King?

Where has this sort of mentality led us? What are the problems of a kingdom without the King? (Example: the #MeToo movement sits side by side with a culture that says sex should not have boundaries).

If we have everything we could ever want, why do we need a King?

Here's the question we'll explore more over the next few weeks: Will you stand up for what is right and good even if it cost you everything?

## ***WEEK TWO: God—Shaped Design***

Read Esther 2:1-18.

How can life get any better than this? What did Esther get to experience? How jealous are you of her?

The classical children's version of this story is a positive one. Esther, a young slave girl without parents, without a future is brought to the court of the most powerful ruler on the planet and wins his favour and affection, being made queen after receiving months of royal treatment.

But how does Esther feel about all of this? Are we ever given her point of view?

Often in the Bible, silence surrounding certain passages communicates as strongly as words. There is a story at the end of the book of Judges where a vengeful priest dismembers his (still presumed living) wife's body after she had been raped by men in the community. He sends her body parts across the nation as a rallying call for the country to come together to take up arms against these wicked villagers...and that's exactly what happens. There is no indication in the text of the story itself that the priest is in the wrong for his reaction to the abuse his wife suffered...it is assumed the readers will know how crazy this story is and how far gone the priest and all the people of Israel are from God (that's the whole point of Judges).

How may this story in Esther 2 indicate that what is happening to Esther may not be a good thing?

Later in Esther's story she comes to a crossroads where she has to make a choice (we'll reserve the details for a later study). The dilemma though is this: old culture or new? The events in Esther 2 are meant to tell us that through this process, Esther was being enculturated and assimilated into the lux Persian culture.

How is this a problem?

Is there anything wrong with adapting to the culture around you?

Esther is the only book in the Bible never to mention God. Christian readers come up with many ways to explain God's absence (like God is behind the scenes or it was written in a culture, like the book of Revelation, where the author had to omit God so the story could be preserved, though God is present nonetheless, etc.). But perhaps God's absence has to do with what the overall story of Esther is all about: will you live out a life of faithfulness in a culture that has erased God from its narrative?

Have you ever found that you yourself have bought into what the culture told you?  
If so, how?

Do you think it's possible for a Christian to be so enmeshed with the culture around them that they don't even notice?

If you were Esther and experiencing a culture that is offering everything, why would you choose to stand out for God if you knew you were going to lose it all?

How do we as Christians navigate a culture where we can (virtually) have everything we need without God?

Read through Matthew 13:18-23.

Which one of these seeds describes you best?

According to Jesus' explanation of this parable, why should a person remain true to the kingdom of God?

Is your life categorized more by enjoying the "fruit" of our current cultural moment or by pursuing fruit that lasts forever?

## ***WEEK THREE: From Comfort to Faithfulness***

Read Esther 4:1-8.

In the previous chapter, one of the king's officials, a man named Haman, becomes greatly offended when Mordecai (Esther's uncle) doesn't bow down to him. So through the use of subterfuge he convinces the king to sign a decree that orders the extermination of the Jewish people throughout the kingdom (this is what most would call "genocide").

What sort of reactions do Mordecai and Esther have to the news of this decree? Why do you think their reactions are vastly different from one another?

According to verse 4, what (or who) was Esther in "great distress" about? Why is this significant? What is lacking in Esther's response?

Mordecai sends back the servant Esther sent to comfort him. Why does he do this? Why not just take the new clothes and move on?

Read Esther 4:9-11.

Is Esther here more concerned about her own fate or the fate of her people?

What is she sacrificing if she does what Mordecai asks? If she risks her position, her wealth and her comfort, what does she personally get out of it? If you were Esther and doing something in faithfulness meant you would possibly lose your money, your status or even your life, would you do it?

Read Esther 4:12-14.

What is Mordecai essentially saying to Esther?

What does he mean when he says, "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place"? What other place is he talking about? If the Jews will be delivered in spite of Esther's silence, why will she still perish?

What will Esther *really* lose if she doesn't do what is right?

The text is implying here that God is at work with Esther or without her. She has the choice which narrative she wants to subscribe to: one of luxury and comfort in the present while missing out on God's grander story, or to choose faithfulness to God's plan while missing out on the cush life she is currently enjoying.

We may very quick to chime in and say choosing faithfulness is better, but this obviously not an easy decision for Esther. And if we are being truthful, it is not easy for us either. We may not have history-altering decisions like Esther does here, but every day we do have to choose in both small and big ways which story we want to participate in.

What are some examples you can think of from even this past week where you could choose faithfulness or choose comfort?

We live in a culture that is not too dissimilar from Esther's in many ways. In a post-Christian culture people don't see the need for Jesus (according to McCrindle Research, 77% of Australians are not at all interested in exploring religion and 26% of Aussies [responding to another question] have a negative attitude about Christianity). Bringing up Jesus in conversation or telling someone about your Christian beliefs may very well result in being ridiculed, looked down on, or excluded.

Yet Mordecai tells Esther that perhaps she was put in her position, in her culture, in that moment in history specifically for this occasion (demonstrating a life of faithfulness). Have you ever thought about that for yourself? Have you been given your time, talent, treasures, status, relationships for such a time as now to stand up for Jesus?

Read Esther 4:15-17.

Does Esther joyfully and painlessly take up Mordecai's advice? Why do you think she wants Mordecai to fast for her? What does that tell you about the difficulty of her decision?

Esther decides to do something those around her considered to be crazy or ridiculous: she sacrifices her life to do what is right ("If I perish, I perish."). This choice highlights why we should be strange Christians in a hostile world – because God is better. Consider this quote from author and pastor David Platt as he discusses reflecting back on our lives:

“We will not wish we had made more money, acquired more stuff, lived more comfortably, taken more vacations, watched more television, pursued greater retirement, or been more successful in the eyes of this world. Instead, we will wish we had given more of ourselves to living for the day when every nation, tribe, people, and language will bow around the throne and sing the praises of the Saviour who delights in radical obedience and the God who deserves eternal worship.”

So what about you? What will you choose?



## ***WEEK FOUR: From Blaming to Identifying***

Read Esther 3:1-4:3.

Why do you think Haman responded so harshly? Is his response to being affronted appropriate?

In the culture that we live in today can you think of any examples of an entire people group being labeled and blamed like this? Are there any current people groups that are being shunned, locked away, deported or killed just because someone has a personal vendetta?

In a world where truth and moral are relative (this is MY truth, that's your truth), incidents like this happen more and more frequently. Why do you think that is?

The Bible gives a pretty clear answer to that question. Read through Genesis 3:1-13.

In a world where God has been removed as King, where the way He designed us to live and relate to Him, one another and the world around us has been ignored, where truth about good and evil is no longer defined through God's standards but the individual's, what is the ensuing result? What are Adam and Eve doing in verses 12 and 13 (what is that action called)?

A 2017 research project from the McCrindle group recorded the following statistics:

53% of Australians think Jesus' life is extremely important to the history and culture of the world. However only 31% of those same responders said that Jesus' life is important to them personally.

88% of non-churched Australians believe churches are beneficial for their community. But only 43% non-church Australians believe churches are beneficial for them personally.

In a different survey done in the US by LifeWay research, they discovered that in a sample size of 1,000 Americans, 65% of those surveyed believe that other people sin. In the same survey, 74% of those surveyed don't believe they personally sin.

What do these statistics tell us about the world we live in? What does it tell us about how we view others (positively or negatively) and how we view ourselves?

As we uncovered in the previous study, we see this same pattern happening in Esther's story. Haman blames an entire people group for the way one man "insulted" him. Surely, there is nothing wrong with his behaviour, in his opinion. Mordecai (the hero so far) identifies with the plight of his people and goes into a period of mourning (this IS my fault and I must do something about it). Esther,

however, is conflicted. She doesn't identify with the suffering about to be inflicted on her people. Instead she sends Mordecai the equivalent of tea and sympathy.

Read again Esther 4:12-14.

In a world where we deflect sin and problems onto others, what is Mordecai challenging Esther to do instead?

In 1 Samuel 11 we are told of the story of David's affair with Bathsheba. A quick version of the story involves David spying on a beautiful woman across the rooftops. He sends for the woman, they sleep together and she becomes pregnant. David realizes this situation is not ideal as she is already married and her virtuous husband doesn't fall for David's tricks. So David sends Uriah (the husband) out on the battlefield where the fighting is the fiercest and orders the commander of the army to abandon Uriah there. That indeed happens and Uriah is killed. Now David is free to take Bathsheba as his wife and his affair with her and its resulting pregnancy are covered up. Problem solved, right? No wrong done here. Morality is not by some higher standard, but by how I deal with it...right?

Read 1 Samuel 12:1-7a.

What is Nathan doing here?

How does that act of telling a story turn David from someone who blames the sin in others to recognizing his own sinfulness?

Have you ever blamed someone else for something until you sat down with them and listened to their story?

How can we move from postures of blame to a posture of identification – with the problems we perceive in the world, with our own sin?

In John 9 we find Jesus healing a man born blind. Everyone in the story is searching for someone to blame for this man's blindness (is it him or his parents fault?). But besides the now healed man, no one wants to search for the healer.

Read John 9:35-41.

How does the story end for the healed man (who identifies who he is and who Jesus is)?

How does the story end for the Pharisees (who blame and cannot identify their own issues or who Jesus is)?

Which response would you rather have?

## ***WEEK FIVE: From the Fear of a Better Offer to Radical Risk***

Two phrases have become fairly prevalent recently: FOMO (fear of missing out) and FOBO (fear of a better offer or fear of better options). FOMO, simply put, is anxiety or apprehension around the idea that other people might be experiencing something that you're not; that your experiences, compared to the experiences of others, just don't measure up. FOMO causes you to do things you normally wouldn't choose to do simply because you don't want to miss out.

FOBO is similar to that concept but instead recognizes that we live in a world where we are inundated with choices. With companies like Amazon give you thousands of options of millions of things you can purchase, all with a click of a button. AirBNB, which puts travelers in homes instead of hotels now offers "experiences" to go along with your home stay, trekking through wine country with a local vineyard owner or milking cows at a nearby farm or sampling microbeer at the new, hip brewery across town. Because we live in a world that offers us more than we can handle, FOBO means that some people will say no to things they normally would say yes to because they think another, better offer could come in at any time.

Why are we talking about FOMO and FOBO? We explored this earlier, but this is one of the dilemmas Esther had to wrestle with in 4:9-11. She tells Mordecai she can't go in to see the king and plead for her people because he must summon her first. If otherwise she approaches his throne without her permission, she MAY be killed. And living seems like a better offer than dying, doesn't it?

What do you think would have happened had Esther waited for a better offer?

If you run your mind back through some other biblical stories, how do you think it would have turned out if...

Abram didn't want to go to some random place he'd never been nor which way he was supposed to go to get there (Genesis 12)?

Moses kept making excuses until God finally gave up this Egyptian rescue plan (Exodus 3)?

Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane said, "If you won't take this cup from me, Father, I'm going to throw it away and find a new one that doesn't involve those nails..."?

Read Matthew 25:14-30.

What is Jesus' point in this passage? Which character is experiencing FOBO?

How are you like the man who buried the money in the ground?

Why do you think this man did what he did (hint: he tries to explain himself in verses 24-25)?

Have you ever said no to what God was inviting you to do simply because a better offer was on the horizon or because what God was inviting you to do was too drastic? Give an example.

Read Revelation 3:14-22.

What is Jesus communicating to "Christians" in this passage?

Ancient Laodicea was surrounded by a city called Hierapolis to the north which was known for its healthy hot springs and a city called Colossae to the south which contained fresh springs of cold, pure mountain water. Laodicea, in the middle had neither of those attractions and had to get water pumped in from its southern neighbours via an aqueduct. By the time this cool, clean Colossian water reached Laodicea, it had become lukewarm, tepid, unclean and undrinkable. It had to be purified by fire in order to be useful again.

How does this imagery find itself applied by Jesus to these supposed Christ-followers?

What do you think being spit (or better translated, "vomited") out of Jesus' mouth means?

These Christians lived in a culture that had it all – they were wealthy and did not need a thing. Why would we need to choose the things of God when we have all this stuff? This is the best offer, isn't it?

Do you ever feel like living on the Northern Beaches of Sydney urges you to choose a "better" and easier offers than living a radical life of faith?

When you think of the decision Esther made, when you think of the choices people like Abraham, like Moses, like Jesus made (when better offers were on the table) – do you look more like them or more like the lazy servant in Matthew 25 or the church in Revelation 3?

In his book, "Radical" author and pastor David Platt encourages his readers to be Christians who take radical risks for Jesus. To not sit around and wait for a better offer, but to act now. Here's the challenge he lays out to combat FOBO:

1. Pray for the entire world
2. Read through the entire Word of God
3. Commit your life to a multiplying community
4. Sacrifice your money for a specific purpose
5. Give your time in another context

You can find more information on these by going to [www.radicalexperiment.org/overview.html](http://www.radicalexperiment.org/overview.html)

But how might you begin to take these sorts of risks this year?

## ***WEEK SIX: From What We've Achieved to What God Has Done***

Read Psalm 66:1-9.

Did you shout when you read that psalm? It's the sort of thing of psalm that deserves a good shout. Maybe try it again?

Philosopher Bertrand Russell once wrote, "Mankind is on the threshold of a golden age; but if so, it will be necessary first to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion."

A Post-Christian culture values progress. People will often say we are living in a golden age. Look at the technology available to us. Look at all the medical advances we've made. We don't need the shackles of a Christian God telling us how we ought to live – we're doing just fine without him.

We may balk at that and find ways to argue that's not true, but many of us have insulated ourselves from a life where God is the one who provides to a life where we have provided everything for ourselves. How often does the sentence "Come and see what the Lord has done" come out of your mouth?

Read Luke 12:13-21.

Why does God chastise this man? What's wrong with success and having stuff?

What happens to us when we begin to pat ourselves on the back for our achievements or our stuff? Is there a problem with being proud of yourself?

Notice the problem in this passage is not that this man is successful or that he has an abundance. The problem lies in the fact that he has left no room for God. The man doesn't think to praise God, for his wealth or for the abilities he's been given to be successful. And then he upsizes his life to further shove God out of the equation. A life where God's provision is not necessary or wanted.

Let's go back to Psalm 66 for a moment. This psalm was a song (we are told that in the opening line). The words at the beginning of each sentence are communal commands: Shout! Say to God! Come and see! Praise! Psalms like this one would have been sung as a community gather at the temple to worship God. They would sing this as a song together regularly. Why were the people encourage to repeat praises like this about what God has done?

Read John 1:1-4.

Why should we direct our focus back to God according to these verses?

Before you and I even were around, Jesus was. And John 1:3 reminds us that he made everything and without him, there is nothing.

John further emphasizes this later on. Read John 15:5-6.

What is Jesus saying here?

A few years ago I (Travis) attended KYCK (a youth conference in the Blue Mountains). One of the speakers put a photo up on the screen. The photo was of a young woman and looked like it was taken 100 years ago. He asked, "Does anyone know who this is?" The room was silent. No one knew. The speaker went on to say that this woman was the most famous person alive at the time. Newspapers followed her around and reported on her every movement. She was wealthy. She was royalty. She was the "it" girl. But today, 100 years on, no one knows who she is. No one cares about how famous she was or how much money she had. She's been virtually erased from memory.

The speaker then said that this will be the case for all of us (which I was quite offended by at the time). No one will remember us, how much stuff we had, how well we did on our HSC, how many friends we had on Facebook or how many countries we visited on our holidays. But, he stated, God's story goes on. And you can be a part of it. Or you can keep living your story on your own.

If someone examined your life right now in this cultural moment, whose story would they say you're living in?

How can we move from a posture of self-fulfillment to that of praise for who God is and what He has done?

How have you seen God move and work in your life this year?

What can you begin doing to put God first heading into 2019?