

The Invisible Work of God

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone, and welcome to St. Paul's. We've not met you before. My name's Steve, the senior pastor here at St. Paul's. And this is a very important term for us here as a church.

It's the end of Follow 25, if you're familiar with that. What Follow 25 has been for us is it's been our five-year ministry plan to see us grow in faith in Jesus Christ and be transformed into the image of Jesus from the inside out, both individually and corporately.

Our plan has been to grow deeper and more confident in God, particularly in a time and a place where the prevailing view of society towards the Christian faith is anywhere between apathy through to hostility.

And so this term, what we're doing is we're looking back at what's happened in the last five years at the same time while we're planning to look forward and seeking God's will for our future together and what he's calling us into.

And so to help us to reflect on what's been and to inspire us to look ahead with anticipation, we are going back two and a half thousand years in history to the book of Esther in the Bible, which the first bits have just been read out to us.

[1 : 29] Now, at first glance, when you take a helicopter view of the book of Esther, it appears like it's one of those kind of Cinderella stories of the Old Testament.

It's the orphan girl who, you know, raised up and becomes, you know, queen of Persia. It's, you know, rags to riches kind of story.

It's a heartwarming, you know, the poor girl gets good kind of thing. And yet the reality is the book of Esther is fundamentally so much more than that.

In fact, the book is about how God saves his people from the brink of disaster, that he never abandons his people.

Because what we're reading here in the book of Esther is one of the most perilous times in the history of God's people. They're in exile in a foreign land.

[2 : 31] They are a minority group ruled by a very powerful empire. And as we will see in the coming weeks, they are literally on the brink of extermination.

And what this book shows us is it teaches how to follow God, how to trust him, and even how to expect big things of him when, even when the society around us, even when we're a minority group and society around us is morally, spiritually, and culturally indifferent or even hostile to the God whom we follow.

So if you've got the St. Paul's app, three points for today that we're going to look at just in these sections just being read out. And the first point, God is working despite appearances.

One of the oddest things about the book of Esther is that there is no mention of God in the book at all. At all.

Not even once. It's not like the writer got to the end of it and sent it off for publishing.

[3 : 57] It came back and re-read his. Went, oh my goodness. I forgot to mention God. You know, like I'm pretty confident it's not an oversight. I'm pretty confident that the writer here is making a point.

And the point is, is that God is always at work. You see, whenever the God of Israel, if you look at the Old Testament, saw his people in trouble in the past, he comes through for them in extraordinary and spectacular ways.

And yet you get to the book of Esther and there's no mighty miracle. There's no vision. Not even a dream.

It appears throughout the entire book that God is absent. That God is totally silent. That God's not there. And yet, when you read through the book, what you discover is a whole heap of a string, if you like, of apparent consequences.

You know, if those things had not happened, God's people would have in fact been exterminated. And each one is connected to the other.

[5 : 19] You know, if Xerxes had not been a fool and Xerxes had not got drunk and made a boast about his queen Vashti, Vashti would have still been queen if he had not got drunk.

And yet Esther must be queen in order to save God's people. And what if there was no one who was Jewish good enough to be part of the harem?

What if Esther had not been pretty? What if Esther was not chosen to be part of the group? What if the king had favoured one of the other girls in the harem?

The whole narrative of Esther is what if, what if, what if, what if, what if, what if, what if? All the way through. And all of them are ordinary, even flawed things, bad things.

And by themselves, they don't appear to be significant at all. See, here's the point that I think the writer is trying to get across here.

[6 : 38] When we see the plagues in the book of Exodus, we say, there is God at work saving his people.

Praise God. When we see Xerxes drunk, we don't go, there is God at work saving his people.

And Esther is telling us, don't make the mistake of overlooking the ordinary, even the sinful and the bad, about God bringing about his purposes.

Don't make the mistake of the materialist who judges situations based on what they can see and feel and can know firsthand.

He may not be seen, but God is at work all the way through this book. His silence is not his absence.

[7 : 45] His hiddenness is not his abandonment. God is not obsessed with appearances the way that we are. He's working out his promises even when it appears that he's nowhere around.

And there are things going on in our lives right now. We could be looking right at it, things that God is doing that are so ordinary and we're not either not seeing it or we're not embracing it.

You see, even in all the ugliness of Esther 1 and 2, and it is ugliness, there's hardly anything redeemable in Esther chapters 1 and 2 at all.

God is at work. He's using the flawed, the failed, and the questionable people in this chapter like Xerxes, all his noblemen, and Esther to bring about his plans and his purposes.

God is at work despite appearances. And that matters to us because we live in a world that is obsessed with appearance.

[9 : 12] The book of Esther begins, if you've got it there, open up chapter 1. It begins by introducing us to the great empire of King Xerxes I, also known as Xerxes the Great, or the fourth king of kings of the Achamanian Empire.

Verse 1, this is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces, stretching from India to Kush. Xerxes I, his reign was from 486 to 465 BC when he was assassinated by the head of his security.

His empire included northwestern India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Iran, Iraq, Armenian, Azerbaijan, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, Turkey, northern Greece, Egypt, Libya, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan.

There is no one at that time more powerful on the face of the earth than Xerxes I, and he knew it. He was not a humble man, and so he holds a party to show the world just how great he is in case there was any confusion about the matter.

Verse 4 tells us that it went on for a full 180 days. He displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and the glory of his majesty.

[10 : 58] In other words, he got all of his wealth out and he paraded it like a ticker tape parade in front of his friends and it took six months for the parade to end.

And with an open bar, it's not surprising he was drunk. See, the whole point here is we are meant to gaze upon the greatness of Xerxes, gaze wide open, eyed at his gold and his silver and his jewelry and the sheer accumulation of his power and his wealth and his splendor and his majesty, and we are meant to admire him.

We are meant to be envious of him. He is the ancient version of a social media influencer. I have the enviable life.

Be like me. Everyone was meant to want to be Xerxes. That's the point. But Queen Vashti knows the man.

While Xerxes is over here for six months doing his best to get the thumbs up and the likes and the little love hearts as many as possible amongst the crowd that's gathered, Vashti is hosting her own separate banquet for the ladies.

[12:39] And Xerxes' party gets a little out of control, tends to happen when the ladies are not around. Verse 10, we see Xerxes make too many trips to the open bar and he decides it's time not just to show off to everyone that he's the wealthiest, most powerful man in the world, but he also has the best looking woman in the world that he has as his queen.

Verse 11, bring before me Queen Vashti wearing her royal crown in order to display her beauty to the people and the nobles for she was lovely to look at.

That's the point. Bring out my queen, put her on the end of the parade so all the guys can drool at her too. He wasn't interested in her friends, his friends meeting her.

she was brought out and paraded amongst all of his drunken friends so that she might be admired and people would go, Xerxes, lucky man.

And for some, if Vashti refuses to come, it's an incredible act of bravery on her behalf and defiance.

[14:12] You see, in a hierarchical shame and honour culture, for an authority like this to be rejected is not just a personal affront, it's a cultural crisis.

The king was furious at this. He's furious. But instead of getting some marriage counselling, he holds a cabinet meeting to work out what now needs to be done with Vashti.

It's a crisis. It's a cultural crisis. What do we do with someone who will not join on the end of the parade for the sake of appearance?

What do we do with someone who's not going to join with the culture? And of course, the nobles are concerned because they've got their wives who Vashti may inspire them to do the same thing.

I mean, anarchy will reign in our homes. Vashti is banished and the royal decree went out to the whole kingdom so that when everyone heard it, verse 20, all the women will respect their husbands from the least to the greatest.

[15:33] Chapter 2 begins with Xerxes. It appears that the next day comes the... he's kind of waking up from his drunken stupor and realises, oh my goodness, I've now banished Vashti.

I need to find another trophy wife. And the whole kingdom is searched for the best-looking candidates. It's probably, from what we could tell, the first recorded instance of an international beauty pageant, Miss Persia Empire for 80 BC.

It's likely that there as many as 1,000 young women were brought back to the king's harem to see which one will be his favoured one.

They underwent beauty treatments and training for a whole year just to get ready for one night with the king. That's it.

One night alone with Xerxes. Every single thing in that preparation turned on that one night. And there were only one of four possible outcomes.

[16:50] Xerxes, you have your night with Xerxes, he sends you back to become a permanent concubine but he never calls you again.

You see, after you've had that one night with Xerxes, you don't go back to your family and your friends. You are forever his concubine and he may never call you again which means that you're essentially banished to permanent widowhood around about the age of 18 in that sort of vicinity somewhere.

Secondly, you become a concubine which he calls for, you know, occasionally for entertainment when he feels like it and that'll be for the rest of your life.

Now, thirdly, you might be one of the one or two, maybe three chosen women whom he marries and the children that you have will become royal heirs with royal benefits.

But fourthly, if you are the one he most favours, you become the queen. He marries and you become the queen.

[17:59] And one of the girls who was taken was a Jewish orphan named Esther who we were just introduced to. And when they took her, her older cousin Mordecai instructs her not to say anything about her Jewish identity or her beliefs.

Nothing. Don't mention that. Hide that. and she was the one of the great harem, she was the one that Xerxes favours over everyone else and he marries her and he makes her his queen. And so this Jewish orphan girl becomes the queen of the greatest empire on the face of the earth. This is not a Cinderella story.

Neither is it giving us relationship advice in any shape or form. You see, what this is telling us, when you stand back and look at it, in the Persian culture, the most important thing about a man was his wealth and his power.

and the most important thing about a woman was her sexual and physical beauty. A man's worth was determined by the size of his wallet and a woman's worth by the size of her dress.

[19 : 38] Can you imagine living in a culture like that? It's pretty ugly. I mean, look at the way the women are treated here.

Look at the pride and the arrogance of these blokes here. But I wonder, apart from some superficial differences, is the world still the same? Is it still the same?

Our society says externals, images, appearances matter more than character. character. What you have matters more than who you are.

Whether it be beauty, talents, money, connections, influence, they matter much more than your character. We are in our society today under constant pressure to undergo beauty treatments on all their various forms.

Our culture says that unless you get these credentials, this kind of beauty, this kind of money, this kind of resume, this kind of education, these kinds of connections, in the end you don't truly matter.

[20 : 57] And it says it different to men and women and it says it different depending on your culture and your race or your class, but it's basically saying the same thing.

You need to go through your culture's beauty treatments, you need to perform, you need to do all this and maybe once you do you will find approval, acceptance, admiration, you become enviable. We live in a world of appearances and performance. We live in a world that elevates the trivial on social media.

we have entire magazines devoted to the antics of soap opera stars. We elevate to hero status and pay obscene amounts of money to people who run around hitting little balls.

We live in a culture that considers the car we drive or the tone of our skin, the texture of our skin as an extension of who we are and our worth.

[22 : 20] We are more impressed by the school someone attends than what they learn when they're there. In other words, we blow it again and again and again just like Xerxes.

and just like Esther too, just like Esther. You see, in these first two chapters, there's nothing redeemable about her.

She has completely sold out her culture and her God. Esther gets to her pinnacle to where she is as queen by absolute compliance to the culture.

She does what Mordecai tells her to do. She listens to the head guy in the harem more than any of the other women in the harem. She did everything that she has asked of her.

She aims to be the next Vashti. She is a blank page on which these men write what they want.

[23 : 43] She kept her identity, her culture and her God secret. She turns her back on God's law when she ultimately goes and has her one night with Xerxes.

she's completely sold out and yet the good news of this entire book as we will see as we go through that God is not yet finished with her.

We'll see again and again God's patience with her, the way that he grows her in invisible ways through circumstances, again and again and again grows her and turns her into something that is truly great, someone who is truly great.

And that which brings me to my third point is in fact God's work, his invisible work and visible work. His work is in fact to make us beautiful. And that is the good news of the message of the Bible is that God is not, this is the great foundation of the Christian faith, God does not bless us, he does not love us, he does not save us because we are beautiful, because we are morally good or exemplary in any way, he goes, ah, there's someone worthy of my love.

[25 : 29] The message of the Bible is that God persistently and consistently gives his grace to people who don't ask for it, who don't deserve it, and don't appreciate it when they're being given it.

The good news is that God has not given up on us either. In 1 Samuel 16, when Samuel's looking for a king to replace Saul, God says, man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the

heart.

You see, true beauty is not on the outside. God is the only one who does not judge a book by its cover.

How often we say that, don't you, you should never judge a book by its cover, and yet we do it every single moment, every single day. Every culture in one way or another communicates to its members, we will accept you, but you must work incredibly hard and make yourself attractive to us, to make yourself lovable, to make yourself approval worthy, and then we will approve of you. And it is exhausting, exhausting, it is exhausting, and there is only one way out, and that is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[27 : 19] One of the most striking images of the Bible is its declaration that God wants to be your spouse. He wants you to be his.

see, what the Bible does, it betrays God not just as the divine creator and the all-powerful king over everything and rules everything in the world, but a God who is an all-loving husband.

What makes that so great is it's not about what we do to make ourselves beautiful to him, good for him, worthy of him, Ephesians 5 puts it like this in its instructions to husbands how to love their wives, it says, husband, love your wives just as Christ loved the church, his bride, and gave himself up and gave and gave cleansing her by the washing with water through the word and to present her to himself as a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. would it surprise you if I said that the whole purpose, the trinitarian God of the Bible, the whole purpose of creation is that he would provide a spouse for his son, that God the Father would provide a spouse for his son, whom his son delights in, who is blameless, flawless, whose heart bursts when he sees her.

The Bible declares in the New Testament that that is his church. Esther was accepted by Xerxes because she was already beautiful, but Jesus loves us despite our flaws and our sin and our ugliness.

[29 : 31] He does it to make us beautiful. Esther had to give her life and her freedom up for the king, but Jesus Christ is the only king, the only spouse who gives up his life and freedom for us.

He gives up everything for us, not because we are lovely, but in order to make us lovely. And when we understand that, when that truth gets driven down into our hearts, we have, I think, at least three things, the three things that we need to be free from our culture's enslavement to external appearances and be made truly beautiful and glorious on the inside.

Firstly, what it does, what it does is it gives us a definition of what true beauty actually is. beauty is. You see, our culture's definition of beauty means that we cannot go past a mirror without noticing ourselves.

that we are obsessed with appearances. Who would have imagined that within two years of combining products that we'd have for a very long time, a camera and a phone, combining those two things, within two years of combining those two things, that dictionaries in the world had to be rewritten to include the word selfie.

a word that didn't exist before 2002. Selfie.

[31 : 27] Millions of selfies are taken every day. And when we look at Jesus instead of ourselves, we actually see ultimate beauty.

we see infinite glory and majesty and splendor. And he gave all of that up for us to make us beautiful.

He left it to one side. He became human. He went to a cross. And the book of Isaiah says that he had no beauty that we would desire him. beauty.

The one of infinite majesty became cosmically unsightly to make us beautiful, to make us majestic in such a way, so cosmic unsightly that his father turns his face away from him.

That is true beauty. genuine beauty is not self-obsession. It is self-sacrifice.

[32 : 42] And that's why it says at the end of Isaiah 53 about Jesus, the one who had no beauty, the suffering servant of humanity, I will give him a portion among the great.

and he will divide the spoils with the strong. That's the first thing. The second thing we get when we understand that Jesus gives up everything to make us beautiful is a new experience of our beauty to him.

Nat and I, my wife, were married 26 years, eight months and 27 days ago today. It's not an anniversary per se.

That's 9,767 days, not that I'm counting. Now I still remember that day, not far from here, I still remember the day when she appeared at the door of the church and started to walk down the aisle. She looked stunning. she was absolutely stunning. Do you know why? Do you know why? Because an awful lot of money had been spent on a fancy dress, on hair and makeup, that she had to get woken up early in order for that all to be worked out.

[34 : 15] now bear with me here. I haven't finished the illustration just yet. I think Nat was beautiful before all of that and in fact I would say so much more to me now than even then.

but it is a fact that makeup and fancy clothes make most of us, pushes most of us up a notch in terms of appearances.

Regardless of what you think of my appearance right now, you should have seen me when I crawled out of bed this morning. this morning, you don't get my when I first wake up look, I've used David Beckham's shower gel this morning.

Not literally his shower gel but the one that promises you, you may look like him if you use the shower gel. And also a thing called facial fuel.

which promises to be a facial recovery accelerator. Now the irony of that particular product is that I didn't even know, I didn't even buy it, it was just there on the bench and it's a men's product and I'm the only man in the house, man in the house, so someone has picked this up.

[35 : 56] I'm working on the assumption that maybe I need it. So there we go, recovery accelerator. We'll see over the course of Esther whether it's worked or not.

Several of the imperfections and flaws that I'm self-conscious of have been hidden, they've been covered up, they've been worked on. See, when Jesus uses the metaphor of us being his bride, one of the things that he has in mind is that despite all the spiritual flaws, despite all the failings, despite all the sin, despite all of my lackluster and apathy towards him, that he has so clothed me with his beauty, with his righteousness, that he has so surrounded me and us with his own beauty that he gave us, that he has so cleansed me of my sin, that when he sees me, when he sees his children, when he looks upon his church, his heart bursts, his heart bursts with delight.

and to the degree that we know that this is true of us, in his eyes, every single moment, it will free us from our culture's enslavement, telling us what we must look like, what we must have, what we must accomplish in order to be accepted, in order to be loved, in order to be approved of, because in Jesus Christ, in the gospel, we have the approval of the only praiseworthy one.

one. The third thing we get when we understand that Jesus gives up everything to make us beautiful in his sight, is a new understanding of the ugly things in life.

Those things which we might otherwise cause us to question his existence or his power or his willingness to intervene or even his presence.

[38 : 39] And including the new understanding of the ugly things within the church which are difficult to navigate and process. There are parts of the Bible that talk about suffering and hardship, refining those who Jesus loves.

And the imagery is always of gold being refined and the impurities being burned up in the furnace. And once we are assured of God's love, I mean really assured of it, when we go through troubles and sufferings, it actually purifies us.

It makes us more beautiful down on the inside. You see, in Jesus, suffering is not God abandoning us in any sense.

He uses the refining process to get rid of the pride and the foolishness and the fear, bit by bit, he is making us more beautiful to him.

And once we are assured of God's love, then we see the hard times, the ugly moments of life as God's spiritual beauty treatments.

[39 : 50] When we go through the hardships with absolute assurance that we are already beautiful in God's sight, we start to become more beautiful in our hearts, in our lives, just like pressure creates a diamond.

So God has not abandoned you in your troubles. He's at work, even if it's not obvious, he's at work, leading you, holding you, refining you, and ultimately saving you.

His invisibility is not his absence. So keep looking to what he's already done for you in Jesus to make you beautiful and acceptable to him.

It's a commitment to you that he intends on following through for all of eternity. Once he sets his heart on you, he will make you beautiful forever.

Romans 8, we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his son.

[41 : 10] Those he predestined, he called, those he called, he justifies, and those he justifies, he glorifies. When he set his heart to love you, the end of that is to make you beautiful.

Let's show some