

GIVING OF GIFTS

1st December 2019

Kid's Church Break Up

A couple of weeks ago I came across a short video about gift giving at Christmas. It's not long and I'll stop halfway through.

Show video clip...

www.youtube.com/watch?v=1abQn15QFco

Anyway, as I was watching I started wondering, is there a Bible background for people giving gifts to each other? We give each other gifts for all sorts of reason apart from Christmas. There're birthdays, wedding anniversaries, Kid's Church break up - all sorts of reasons. But do we see people exchanging gifts in the Bible – ordinary people.



Time to dig into the Bible I thought. So, I dug around and found there's a bit gift giving to kings. But that's to be expected, given how important they are. There are two birthdays mentioned in the Bible - again both kings and though not recorded there were sure to be gifts given. But what about ordinary people giving gifts to each other?

Well, there's one example where this happens. And it's all to do with a wonderful heroine in the Bible - Queen Esther. Do you know Esther's story? It's amazing and well worth the telling.

Esther was an orphaned Jewish girl who lived a long, long time ago in ancient Persia. If you're familiar with the Disney movie Aladdin, then her story is set in the same times and same place - with the palaces and the clothes and all that stuff.

Anyway, Esther was brought up by an older cousin, a Godly man called Mordecai. Well, who'd believe it, but God had big plans for Esther? And through very unusual circumstances Esther became Queen. If you haven't, you must read Esther's story as I haven't time to go into all of her adventure.

Anyway, there she was, the wife of the king of Persia - the most powerful man of the known world. But even after Esther's wedding the king didn't know Esther was Jewish. Why? Because, the - Jews were not well regarded in Persia. So much so Mordecai advised her to keep her Jewishness a secret.

Well, about five years after Esther was made Queen there was trouble - big trouble. The second most powerful man in the empire, Haman, had long hated the Jews. Like - he really hated them. Now, because Haman was so important people used to bow before him as he walked by or entered a room. Everyone bowed except one man - Mordecai! And because Mordecai's Jewish this made mad – hopping mad. So, Haman festered and brooded and plotted and schemed until he came up with a wicked plan. He tricked the king into signing a law that allowed all the enemies of the Jews to kill and rob them on a set day. On this day the police would not lift a finger to protect any Jew from mob violence and looting.

And of course, this included Esther. But only if people find out she's Jewish. What will she do? Would she keep her Jewishness a secret and so save her life - even if all her people are killed? But if she tells her husband, the king, that she's Jewish then on that set day even she might be killed. What do you think she'll do?

Well, she hatches a plan. A cunning and clever plan. She asked Mordecai and all the Jews, even her own maids, to fast and pray for three days. Then, after three days, she planned to enter the king's throne room without invitation. Now to do this - to enter unannounced - was at risk of death. If the king did not raise his scepter to greet the person his guards are under strict instructions to remove and immediately kill that person.

So, after three days, Esther bravely enters the throne room uninvited. What will the king do? Scepter extended or not? Life or death? Well, as she enters, and the king looks up and is startled to see her. Surprised, he pauses... and then slowly raises his scepter. Phew! Esther is safe - for now. She then invites the king and the wicked Haman to a special banquet – to a wonderful meal. Goodness me. What's she thinking? What is her plan?

So, both men attend. Haman basks in the favour of both king and queen while the king is delighted. So, the king offers Esther anything she desires, up to half his kingdom. So, she invites the King and Haman to another special dinner and the scene is repeated. But this time when the king offers Esther half his kingdom Esther shocks everyone. She accuses Haman of trying to kill her - the Queen of Persia no less. Well, can you imagine what happens next. Haman panics and is arrested and executed - while God uses Esther's favour with the king to save the Jews from certain death. Great outcome! God saves his people through Esther.

And Esther's cousin Mordecai is promoted to major importance in the palace. So, Mordecai writes to all the Jews throughout the Persian Empire instructing them to each year celebrate how God used Esther to save his people. So, in Esther 9:22 we read...

(Mordecai) wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor. Esther 9:22

And too this day Jewish folk still give each other presents on the festival of Purim which is around the end of February.

So, there it is. The answer to my question. The only time ordinary people exchange gifts in the Bible is here in the book of Esther. Why? To celebrate God saving his people. To thank God for his salvation.

And this brings us to Christmas. Why do we give gifts at Christmas? Well, one reason is because it's Jesus birthday and we give gifts at birthdays. And though this is true there's a lot more to Christmas than this. We give gifts at Christmas because the baby Jesus grew up to do what Esther did, but in a much grander way. Yes, Jesus came to save God's people.

You see, when the king of Persia signed off on Haman's wicked law that all the Jewish people were condemned to perish there was no way to change that law - for the law of the Medes and Persians could not be changed. But still - God raised up Esther who saved his people from certain death.

Now it's similar for us. God's law is clear. Romans 6:23 - the first half

For the wages of sin is death... Romans 6:23

We are talking eternal death, separation from God and his goodness. And this law cannot be changed. It's like the law of the Medes and the Persians - but more so. So, God just can't change his mind just like Esther's husband – the king - couldn't his mind. No, God needed a plan - cunning plan like Esther's, but more so. And his plan was... Jesus.

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 6:23

God loved us so much that he sent his Son, his one and only Son, so all who believe in him will not perish but have eternal life. How? Jesus took our place. He was punished in our stead. He took the wages of sin - the wages no one wants - he took the wages of our sin and he was nailed to the cross. He was punished so we could be saved.

And this is why we give gifts at Christmas. Just as Esther was used by God to save his people and so gifts were given. Likewise, because Jesus was used by God to save his people gifts are given at Christmas.

I mean this is Good News of the Gospel. It's the most wonderful news of Christmas - of Christmas that points to our salvation at the foot of the cross.

Great stuff. But... all this was is by way of me being distracted in the middle of short video clip about Christmas. So, to finish, I'll show you the rest of the clip.

Here it goes... www.youtube.com/watch?v=1abQn15QFco

Amen