



STUDY GUIDE

Jesus said: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember what I told you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also."

John 15:18-20



Kew Baptist
CHURCH

Faith in a Hostile World

The world we live in is hostile to faith in Jesus. Open Doors reports that in 2018, 215 million Christians faced persecution of some kind, and one in nine Christians experienced high levels of persecution. 4,136 Christians were killed for faith-related reasons in 2018, which is about 11 Christians per day. Additionally, 1,266 churches or Christian buildings were attacked, and 2,625 Christians were arrested, detained or imprisoned without trial. Open Doors expects these figures to rise by about 14% across 2019. In Australia, these figures and incidents can seem very foreign. We are fortunate to live in a country where persecution for our faith in Jesus is unlikely to take these forms. However, we all inhabit various “worlds”, some of which can be hostile to our faith.

Some of us know what it’s like to be the only follower of Jesus in our family, to notice the eye-rolls whenever we mention God or anything connected to church. We know what it feels like to be isolated, occasionally ridiculed, or treated with pity or confusion. Some of us spend time in the world of university, where atheism is presumed and belief in God is treated as a weakness or deficiency. We’ve learnt to keep our mouth shut in class discussions about ethics, or politics, or the origins of morality to avoid increased scorn and insult. Some of us inhabit the world of the workplace, a world where materialism and individualism rule. We’re daily confronted by the lure of more money, more status and constant self-promotion, and struggle to resist engaging in workplace gossip and complaints about superiors. We live in other worlds too; friendship groups, sporting teams, share-houses, social clubs and others. Worlds in which it can be hard to have faith in Jesus.

Living out faith in God in a hostile world is not a new phenomenon. This term, we’ll be considering three Old Testament characters; Ruth, Esther and Daniel, who sought to be faithful to God in hostile worlds. We’ll consider how these three young adults sought to remain faithful to God despite the hostility and pressure of the world around them. Let’s pray that God would encourage us through these individuals as we seek to live out our faith in Jesus in each hostile “world” that we inhabit.

Introduction to the Book of Ruth

In one sense, the place that Ruth inhabited was not a hostile world to specifically have faith in God. It was quite simply a hostile world.

The book of Ruth begins “in the days when the judges ruled ...”. This was the period of time when God’s people were in the promised land, after the death of Moses’ successor Joshua, and before the establishment of the first kings of Israel (roughly 1370-1100 BC). During this time, “judges” ruled. These were prophet-warrior-leaders appointed by God to guide his people to follow him. However, the era of the judges was marked by increasing wickedness by God’s people, including the judges themselves. Cycles of violence and betrayal, idol worship and rape, and finally civil war mark this period. This was a hard, cruel and merciless time to be alive.

Secondly, this world was hostile to Ruth as a single woman and a widow. Ruth comes to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi. In this deeply patriarchal society, without a male bread-winner in their household, these women were at risk of starvation, the need to go begging, or being taken advantage of by others. Boaz warns the young widow Ruth about men who might “lay a hand on you”, and Naomi warns her that she “might be harmed” in the wrong place. This was a hostile world for a single widow.

Finally, Ruth was a foreigner during a time in Israel when national heritage was highly prized. Ruth had come to faith in Israel’s God, which should have led to acceptance into God’s people, and yet it’s clear that things were not so easy. God’s people had recently spent years fighting the non-Israelite inhabitants of the land, and a foreigner like Ruth would have been treated with suspicion and isolation.

Yet through the book of Ruth, we see God at work. Despite her circumstances, Ruth’s faithfulness to God and her loving kindness to her mother-in-law shine through. As one commentator has said, few writers have been more successful in making goodness attractive (Joyce, NBC). For those of us for whom life is hard, and God perhaps seems distant, may Ruth encourage us to have faith in Jesus in the hostile world we find ourselves within.

Ruth 1

It's hard to have faith in God ... in the midst of terrible circumstances

- List all the things that have gone wrong from 1:1-7.

In Jewish cultural practice, wives join their husband's family, possibly even to re-marry within that extended family. Naomi could have insisted that the two young widows stay with her since they married into her family, and assist her as an older widow.

- Why does Naomi encourage them to return home? (1:8-9)
- What does this tell us about Ruth and Orpah and Naomi?
- Who is Ruth being loyal to in her insistence to stay with Naomi? (1:16-18)

Consider Ruth's faith in God and Naomi's faith in God in the midst of their grief...

- How would you describe Naomi's faith in God? (1:13, 20-21)
- How would you describe Ruth's faith in God? (1:16-18)
- Have you found it hard to have faith in the midst of grief?
- Do you relate to Naomi or Ruth's reactions?
- What was helpful at that time?

Ruth 2

It's hard to have faith in God ... when you don't belong

- List all the things about Ruth that might make life hard for her in Israel.
- What is the one thing that she (now) has in common with these people? (1:16)

The period of the Judges (1:1) immediately followed God's people taking the promised land, and expelling foreign tribes. National identity and ethnic "purity" would have been highly prized at this time (e.g. Deuteronomy 7:1-6).

- Where in chapter 2 is Ruth's identity as a foreigner in focus?
- Have you ever felt totally out of place, even among other believers in Jesus?
 - What made you feel out of place?
 - How did this affect your faith in God?
- Read Leviticus 19:9-10. How does Boaz's actions (Ruth 2:8-16) compare to the gleaning requirements of the Old Testament?
 - What was the impact of these actions for Ruth and Naomi (2:17-23)?
 - What was Boaz's reason for this approach? (2:11-12)
 - What does this tell us about Boaz's character?
- Can you think of someone who might be in a similar position to Ruth today?
 - What things might we be able to do to help?

Ruth 3-4

It's hard to have faith in God ... in the face of total uncertainty

The phrase “spread the corner of your garment over me” (3:9) is a metaphor for care, protection and marriage. Also used (“wings”) in 2:12 to refer to God’s care and protection.

- What is your impression of Ruth’s approach to Boaz? (3:3-9)
- What were the possible outcomes of this approach?
- How do you think Ruth felt after making her bold request? (3:9)

In Jewish culture, a family in trouble was to be cared for in various ways by extended family members (Lev 25:25-55). In Naomi’s case, she had no male offspring, and so the land of her former husband probably needed to be sold to provide for her and Ruth. Whoever bought the land would also take responsibility for Ruth, including raising an heir through her. If a son were born, the property would revert to him, and so remain in Naomi’s former husband’s family name. The “guardian-redeemer” refers to the closest family member to Naomi, who would have first option on purchasing (“redeeming”) the land, and also first responsibility for Ruth.

- What were the possible outcomes of Boaz’s actions at the town gate (4:1-5)?
- How do you think Boaz (and Ruth) felt in the face of this uncertainty?
- How does your faith appear in the face of uncertainty, or when things are out of your control?
- Compare Naomi’s faith through Ruth and the eventual ending (1:20-21, 2:20, 4:13-17). When have you been able to look back and see how God was at work?
- What about when things don’t work out neatly?
 - What perspective does God have that we do not?

Introduction to the Book of Daniel

The Book of Daniel is and has been a source of immense encouragement and hope for God's people for around 2500 years. Daniel was one of the exiles that were captured and transported to Babylon (modern day Iraq) after Jerusalem was captured and destroyed in 587 BC by king Nebuchadnezzar

Born into royalty and nobility in Israel, Daniel and 3 of his friends, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, are taken to Babylon to serve in the king's court. In a hostile place of idol worship, impurity, exile, and away from the praise and worship life of Israel, they learn how to remain faithful and thrive in godly living in this place of exile. God's power in them and with them is more than enough to deal with the idolatrous and satanic power of Babylon. Here's a taste of how their faith thrived in a hostile world:

Firstly, they discover that one must have godly friendships to navigate through Babylon. Daniel has a small group of friends that he can share, pray, laugh, and cry with. He can't face the challenges and persecution of Babylon without friends - but not just any friends; friends who seek and walk with God together.

Secondly, Daniel has a fresh and vibrant spiritual life of prayer and worship. Being a stranger in exile forces him to depend on God and cry out to God. His faith in the God of Israel, and his mystical experiences, set his spiritual life far above all of the pseudo-spiritualities of Babylon. For Daniel and his friends, "the one effective means of passive resistance to a political power and to a religiously oppressive regime is prayer." (Robert A. Anderson, *Signs and Wonders: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel*).

And finally, Daniel and his friends put faithfulness and loyalty to God ahead of their own personal safety and security. They refuse the privileges and luxury of the Royal House; they refuse to compromise even when faced with death; and they are prepared to lose position, wealth and status to remain true to God.

Daniel and his 3 friends stand as exemplary figures and beacons of hope for all those who seek to keep the faith in a hostile world.

Daniel 1

- Read chapter 1 together: Imagine for a moment that you and a few other fellow believers were captured by a hostile foreign power, taken far from your homeland and placed in a society with no church, where public displays of Christian worship were forbidden, and you were cut off from the familiarity and resources of your homeland. How would you live out your faith and what would you need in order to stay true to Jesus?
- When Daniel and his friends refuse the king's food, they are honouring the teaching of God in the Bible that was given for the Jews in the OT. Faithfulness is to love God's Word and obey it. How does the Bible factor in your week and daily life? Have you applied yourself to understand it and do you value it as God's revealed truth?
- Read v. 8 and identify the key verb that forms the basis of Daniel's decision to remain faithful, and ask how you too might r_____ to do the same.
- Read v. 3-4 and v. 17 & 20. Discuss the connection between their study of literature and God giving them knowledge and understanding, and why you think they excelled. How can we study our culture, learn the worldviews and philosophies, and keep a faithful, biblical and truthful worldview at the same time?
- Discuss: "...the Church isn't just a place where we come to worship, have our needs met and consume activities and programmes, but rather a countercultural community that is committed to unmasking the values of the dominant culture rather than sanctioning them and helping both those inside and outside the Church to find a new way home." (Tom Sine, *Mustard Seed vs Mcworld*, 235).
- Pray together that your hearts might be encouraged and your lives strengthened to be faithful to God.

Daniel 3

- Daniel doesn't go it alone. He has 3 close friends, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, who each help each other stand against the hostile power of Babylon. The Babylonian Empire changes their names, but it could not change their identity: they belonged to God, loved God and helped and encouraged each other to live this out in a hostile world. Share for a few moments on significant people in your own life who have been influential and important in your life of faith.
- Read Daniel ch. 3. Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego were under pressure to conform and faced great loss if they rebelled. Can you imagine the immense pressure to worship the false god Nebuchadnezzar had set up? They worship God the Lord even though it is not the popular, trendy or culturally normal thing to do. What false gods are being erected in our culture that are calling us to worship them? In other words, what does our culture value and love that may lead us away from unswerving devotion to God? What costs might there be in refusing?
- Read v. 16-18. Talk about the nature of their faith in God.
- Read v. 28-30. What happens as a result of their faithfulness and willingness to stay true to God?
- Throughout Daniel we see the 4 friends staying true and creating a community of faith in a hostile world. This story is a testimony to the essential importance of belonging to a church community. Here's a list of a few qualities of Daniel and his friends: they learn and study together, worship together, pray together, eat and do life together, help each other be the best they can be, are there for one another in hard times, and remain utterly loyal to each other. How can you pursue friendships like this? Are you a friend like this?
- Pray together for our church community and for yourselves to have this kind of depth, love and friendship that these 4 enjoyed.

Daniel 6

- Read the following quote and share together for a few moments about living your life for Christ in the light of eternity:

“Although [Daniel] lived in this world, he did not live for it. It was in another world that he invested his life, and it is there that he now enjoys his inheritance. It goes without saying that one would be a fool to live for another world if that world did not exist. That really would be seriously delusional. On the other hand, if it does exist, not to invest one’s life in it would be equally delusional, would it not?” (Prof John Lennox, *Against the Flow: The Inspiration of Daniel in an Age of Relativism*).

- Read ch. 6.
 - Read 6:1-5 and discuss the nature of Daniel’s work. How does doing a good job, being trustworthy, reliable and excellent at your job glorify God? And what sort of pressures do you face as a Christian at work/uni?
 - Read 6:10-11. What was Daniel’s response to the threat and why was this a good response? How might his attitude serve as an example for you?
 - Read 6:25-30. What was the result of Daniel’s faithfulness and trust in God?
 - Read together the “Daniel Declaration” (back page) and spend some time praying to recommit your lives before God and His purposes for your life and this world.

Introduction to the Book of Esther

In 587 BC the armies of Babylon invaded Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, and God's people were exiled in chains. About fifty years later (539 BC), the Persian empire took over Babylon, and their king, Cyrus, allowed Jewish people to return to Judah if they wished. Many Jews returned, but even more remained scattered through the vast Persian kingdom, having fulfilled Jeremiah's encouragement to "build houses and settle down" in their places of exile (Jer 29:5). In 486 BC, Darius, the Persian king ruling at the end of Daniel's life, died, and his son Xerxes became king.

Esther tells the story of a young Jewish woman living in Susa, the capital of the vast Persian empire at this time. Through various steps, Esther enters into the Persian courts as a prized consort for this foreign king Xerxes. Life for Esther would have been a strange mix of celebrity status and slavery. As the eventual replacement queen for the deposed Vashti, Esther lived in the lavish courts of the most powerful empire in the world at the peak of its luxury. She would have enjoyed the finest of food, clothing and treatment, and would have been a household name throughout the kingdom. At the same time, Esther was a foreigner, and the partner to a brutal, violent and impulsive king, who wielded unchecked power, and was easily offended.

This was a hostile world for Esther to have faith in the Lord God. On one hand the lure of luxury and excess beyond her wildest dreams would have tempted her to indulge in this celebrity lifestyle, and forget about the God of her youth. Just as today the pursuit of money and fame is toxic for faith in God, this was a daily risk for Esther. At the same time, Esther served a king who saw himself as a god and endured no rivals. For Esther to publicly live out her faith was incredibly dangerous.

Perhaps indicating the risk of persecution even at the time of writing, the book of Esther never mentioned God. And yet God's hand can be seen through the book. Despite all the odds, Esther remained faithful to her God and her people; an example of how one young woman lived out her faith in the most hostile of worlds. May Esther be our example, whether we are tempted to forget God in pursuit of luxury and wealth, or tempted to deny God in the face of risk and danger.

Esther 1-3

- Describe the inner world of King Xerxes from 1:1-8.
- Describe Xerxes character and power from chapters 1:1-2:4.
- What was it about Esther that won “the king’s favour”?
- What would life have been like for Queen Esther (from 2:17-19 onwards)?
- What are the challenges to faith in this kind of lifestyle?
- Why do you think Mordecai encouraged her to keep her background and faith a secret? (2:20)
- Are there sometimes occasions when it’s wise for us to keep our faith a secret?

It’s not entirely clear why Mordecai refused to kneel to Haman (3:2). Jews were allowed to pay respect to human authorities, as Mordecai and Esther clearly did to the King (e.g. Esther 5:2). It could be because of history between the Agagites and the descendants of Kish (1 Samuel 9:1-2, 15:7-8, 20; Esther 2:5-6, 3:1). Perhaps Mordecai just didn’t respect Haman as a leader since the king had to order people to bow to Haman (Esther 3:2).

- Haman identifies that Jewish people are “different” (3:8). How are we as followers of Jesus “different” today to the world around us?
- What “customs” do we keep? Which do we avoid?
- What can we face for holding on tightly to our beliefs?
- When does our “difference” make it hard to hold onto our faith?

Esther 4-6

- Describe Mordecai's faith in God from Esther 4:12-14.
- How does this affect his instruction to Esther to act on behalf of the people?
- How do you think followers of Jesus in positions of worldly influence should act?
 - Have you ever been in a position of influence at a key moment when you've been able to act "for such a time as this"? (4:14)
- More broadly, how do we use our relative privilege for God's sake?
- Describe Esther's faith in God from Esther 4:15-16.
 - What might be implied in her instructions for "fasting"?
- How is Esther's action in 5:1-2 risky:
 - Considering her minority ethnic and religious status?
 - Considering her celebrity status as the queen of the empire?
- When have you seen Christians taking risks in an environment hostile to faith?
 - Have you ever had to take a risk for God in a hostile environment?
- Where might God be at work in chapter 6 behind the scenes?

Esther 7-10

- Describe the scene and the risk Esther is taking in 7:1-6.
- How do we act when we have an advantage in society (8:7-13)? How should we act?
- What does Jesus and the New Testament teach about revenge? (Matt 5:9, 38-48, Rom 12:17-21)?
- Are there occasions when Christians should “stand up for themselves” or “fight back”?
 - What would that look like? (Acts 4:13-22, 1 Peter 2:11-17. *Remember that the same Peter in Acts wrote the book of 1 Peter!*)

The Jewish festival of “Purim” (“pur” means “the lot”, a mechanism of chance, like dice) was established through the events of Esther (9:20-28). Ironically, the date chosen “by lot” was cast under Haman’s rule, as the date for destruction of the Jewish people (3:7)!

- Can you think of a Christian image and day of remembrance that is ironic in celebrating a seeming “defeat”?
- Given that the Jews would again be ruled over and suffer persecution after the days of Esther, what purpose would Purim serve in those hard times?
 - How could our remembrance of Jesus fulfil the same purpose?
- Discuss how Mordecai used his position (esp. 10:1-3). How can we use our various “positions” of authority well?

Personal Notes/Reflections

The Daniel Declaration

I will be wholehearted, sincere and devoted in my faith in God and walk with Jesus above all else, understanding it may cost me friends, money, time, reputation, acceptance.

I will work hard, be diligent, and take seriously my studies, my work, and my relationships, contributing to the flourishing and peace of my city, nation and world, using my time, talents and gifts wisely and for the glory of God.

I will commit in love to spiritual friends in the faith in a regular rhythm of prayer, bible study, service, mission, mutual encouragement and accountability, and commit to being a faithful, serving and fruitful member of a church community.

I will reject the permissible ‘foods’ of my culture that will not enhance my wellbeing or faithfulness to God. Specifically, I reject greed and indifference toward the poor and oppressed, pornography, sexual practice outside of marriage, drunkenness, party drugs, and any other idols or false gods.

I will rely on God’s grace and power to fulfil this declaration, and I will never be proud about fulfilling it, despair when I fall short, or look down on others who do so, but help them become all God desires them to become.

