

Esther

September 29, 2024

Lesson Summary

Main Passages

Esther 8

Session Outline

1. The Background (Esther 1:1-12)
2. The Plot (Esther 2:1-11; 3:1-6)
3. The Conclusion (Esther 4:14-17; 6:1-3; 7:1-6; 8:1-6)

Theological Theme

God is present even when He is seemingly silent. He continually gives His people opportunities to do what is right and stand for Him in the world.

Call to Action

Because of God's providential care and love for us, it is wholly possible to serve Him in a culture that refuses to do likewise.



Leader Guide

Esther

Introduction

Have you ever been in a crowd and seen someone gesturing in your direction, but you look behind you, unsure if they are motioning to you? Or maybe your pastor approaches you about taking on a leadership role, and you begin to wonder if he really meant to talk to you or someone else.

We all have times when we feel like someone else should step up or believe we simply aren't the right person for the job. We don't believe we are important, skilled, noticeable, prepared, or gifted enough to take the necessary role. But in the kingdom of God, it is not so much your ability as your availability that is important. God is looking for imperfect people to serve and obey Him. He uses imperfect and needy people to do incredible and seemingly impossible things if we are just willing to step out in faith. Today, we are studying one such situation, where God did impossible things through ordinary people who were faithful and obedient.

- ❓ When was a time you felt ill-equipped to fill a role you were approached about?
- ❓ What kind of excuses lead us to this way of thinking?

Session Summary

As Jews still exiled in Persia, Mordecai and Esther gave an example of what it means to trust the Lord despite circumstances. They also demonstrated how to use the place and position they had been given for God's people and His glory, even at great risk to their own lives. Standing for what is right can be risky and often draws opposition, just as we see in this book of the Bible.

Even though God is not mentioned by name in the book of Esther, He is present throughout the pages of this incredible story. Only God could take a terrible situation that spelled out death and annihilation of the Jews and turn it around so that evil was met with justice, and God's people were preserved and honored. The lessons of Esther are varied but applicable to living as a Christ follower in today's culture.

1. The Background (Esther 1:1-12)

About thirty years after the events recorded in Haggai, we come to the events that transpired in the book of Esther. This is the story of a young Jewish girl who lived with her relative as an exile. God's people had been in exile and though some groups had returned home, Esther remained with the group left in the reigning superpower of Persia. Despite their exile, these were still God's people, and He was working out His redemptive plans on their behalf.

The Israelites were living in a time between facing exile as the consequence for their disobedience and rebellion before God and the deliverance God promised to bring about when they turned their hearts back to Him. Think about the wondering and speculation that would be involved as they lived out their days questioning when their relationship with God would be restored and they would live in their own land under their own rulers once again.

- ❓ What specific things would have been hard living as one of God's people during this period? What makes waiting particularly hard in your life?

This is one of the only books of the Bible that does not mention God's name specifically. But even when God seems silent or distant, He is always at work and in control. His presence is seen throughout the circumstances of this incredible story and that speaks to believers today. God's silence does not equate to absence, and you can rest assured that He continues to see exactly where you are, and He cares about all you are going through.

- ❓ When or how have you experienced God's presence even when He seemed to be silent?

The King of Persia, Ahasuerus or Xerxes, threw two major feasts. His desire was to impress and brag about his wealth and power. These events served to feed his vanity and pride. Look at how these feasts are described, and you can better understand how elaborate and pompous the situation was. The first feast lasted six months and was hosted for the nobles, princes, and military officials with the purpose of impressing them and planning for another battle. He was strategizing to increase his wealth and power further.

Following this feast, the King threw a lavish seven-day feast for "all the people" (v. 5). While he entertained the men, Queen Vashti was holding a feast in the palace for the women. During the feast, King Xerxes got intoxicated and, trying to impress his guests, sent for Queen Vashti to be paraded before the men. The Queen refused to take part in something so degrading and humiliating. The king was incensed and, after listening to

some of his advisors who were scared that the queen's refusal would give their own wives permission to do the same, decided to have the queen removed from her position and banished. Thus, the stage was set for God's plan to save His people using a young Jewish woman.

- Application: When have you seen God use unusual or unexpected circumstances to work in your life or the world?

2. The Plot (Esther 2:1-11; 3:1-6)

After the situation with Queen Vashti, the question of finding her replacement arose. In response, all the beautiful, young virgins of the region were brought to the palace for preparations, including a young Jewish woman named Esther.


Esther, an orphan, had been living with her relative, Mordecai. One of Mordecai's ancestors was Kish: an ancestor of Saul, who was the first king of Israel. Mordecai could trace his family roots back to royal Jewish lineage. Through the events that followed, God would again redeem the failures of the past by raising up new people who were faithful to Him.

- When was a time you've seen God use a seemingly failed or dead-end circumstance to bring glory to Himself?

The Jews had been taken into captivity years earlier. Then when Persia overtook Babylon, some exiles were sent back to Jerusalem, as we studied in Haggai. Mordecai and Esther were not part of the group sent back to rebuild the temple, so they remained in the foreign land and had been immersed in that culture. Esther kept her Jewish heritage hidden under the advisement of Mordecai and found favor with the King so that he chose her to be the next Queen.

- Why might Mordecai have counseled Esther to refrain from announcing her Jewish heritage?


One of the king's highest officials was a man named Haman. In chapter 3, we see that Haman was much like the king and sought his own glory from his position. When Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman, it infuriated him. This was the starting point for an elaborate plan Haman put into place to exact revenge on not only Mordecai but all the Jews. Mordecai took a stand, and it caused his enemy to put a target on him—even though Mordecai had been well respected and well known, even bringing an assassination plot he overheard to the king, saving his life. Doing the right thing often will not prevent a person from suffering unpleasant or even dangerous situations, but we can always trust that God is with us and working.

 Application: When have you felt led to do the right thing according to God even when it meant trouble for you personally?

3. The Conclusion (Esther 4:14-17; 6:1-3; 7:1-6; 8:1-6)


With the evil plot of Haman against Mordecai and the Jews in place, the middle chapters of Esther cover details of Mordecai and Esther's response. We see how Esther planned, prayed, and fasted in preparation to speak up on behalf of her people. While this may seem like a natural situation for the queen to speak to the king about an issue near to her heart, it was not the case. In that day, no one was allowed to come before the king unless he sent for them, including the queen. To win his favor, Esther had to be wise and careful about her actions, or she could lose her life and any hope of rescuing her people.

Mordecai's words in chapter 4 verse 14 are reflective of his faith in God. He told Esther that she may be part of the plan to rescue the Jews but if not, he still had faith that they would be preserved. Mordecai believed God would save His people. Believers throughout the years have been inspired by the encouragement to Esther that it was, "for such a time as this" that she had been placed in her position. It was no accident that she aligned with the exact time in history that her people needed help. This is another sign of God's providence, despite no direct reference to Him.

 How might God have placed you in your exact time and situation to do His will?

Esther indicated her own faith by her preparation and her declaration that if she should perish while doing the right thing then so be it. But God was working behind the scenes to thwart Haman's plans of killing Mordecai and extinguishing the Jews in the land. Even as Haman had gallows built to execute Mordecai, the king was unable to sleep. To help inspire sleep, the king had a servant read to him from the chronicles of his reign as king.


It was common practice that the events in the kingdom were recorded as part of the historical account. When the king recounted the assassination plot against him that Mordecai had warned about, he asked how they had rewarded Mordecai's act. Mordecai's right act four years earlier was used to help save his people.

 What do these events teach you about God's work that we don't see?

Risk and Reward

Mordecai's reply to Esther was direct and to the point: Esther had no safe choices. Appearing unbidden before the king could mean death, but remaining silent, when so many servants and eunuchs knew of her connection to Mordecai the Jew, could likewise result in her death once the genocide was carried out.


At a banquet she prepared for the king and Haman, Esther finally revealed the evil plot against her people and asked for her life to be spared. The King was incensed that anyone would plot against her and when he learned Haman was behind such evil, he turned the tables on his previously trusted advisor. What Haman meant as evil against Mordecai and the Jews was used against him in a complete reversal. God took Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews from a place of certain death and condemnation to a place of honor and security. Esther risked her life to defend God's people in an evil culture with no promise of a favorable outcome, but God used the bold stand of this woman.


 Application: Where might you need to stand for the Lord, even if the earthly outcome is uncertain?


Conclusion

God is working regardless of how we perceive Him. He is completely capable of reversing a seemingly unfavorable situation and turn it for His glory. As Christ followers, we are to trust Him and be willing stand for Him even when the circumstances align against us. There will always be those who are looking to thwart the plans and the people of God.

You have been placed where you are to do the will of God and represent Him to the lost world. Esther made the choice to stand for God's people and Mordecai chose to do what was right, even though it was risky. We also face risks when we choose God's way and when we obey Him over conforming to the world. Though not mentioned in the book of Esther, God is present throughout the pages, and He is at work in your life too. You can count on God to do the impossible, and you can trust every promise He has made. Mordecai displayed faith in the promises of God from decades earlier and it served him well. No matter what circumstances you are facing, God has the power and ability to reverse your situation in an instant should He so chose. And we can trust that, ultimately, He will flip the script of the enemy until His people are victorious and evil is defeated.

 Where is God calling you to take a stand for Him now? How will you respond?

 How can we as a group encourage one another toward faithfulness to God in questionable moments?

 How can you seek a gospel conversation with another person by sharing the story of Esther?

Prayer of Response

Thank the Lord for sending Jesus to reverse the course of your life and give you what you do not deserve. Ask for opportunities to stand for Him and courage to follow through when the opportunities come your way.

Memory Verse

"If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this." - Esther 4:14

Additional Resources

- *Exalting Jesus in Esther* by Landon Dowden
- *Be Committed* by Warren Wiersbe
- *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* by Knute Larson and Kathy Dahlen

Disciples Multiplying Disciples



Historical Context of Esther

Purpose

The principle message of the book of Esther called all Jews to celebrate Purim. The purposes of Esther can be distinguished into two types: those purposes that pertain to the original audience of the book during the Persian period, and the broader, theological purposes that transcend the book's original readers.

Author

As in most Old Testament books, the author of the book is unknown. In the Jewish Talmud it is suggested that the members of the Great Synagogue wrote the book. However, it is hard to imagine this prestigious group of religious scholars writing a book that mentions the Persian king 190 times but never mentions God. Many early writers, Jewish as well as Christian, suggested Mordecai as the author.

Setting

Mid-twentieth-century critical scholars tended to date the book late, even into the second century BC. However, most now argue for an earlier date. The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947 showed that the Hebrew of Esther was very different from the Hebrew of the first century BC. Also, there are no Greek words in the text of Esther, which would suggest that it was written before Alexander the Great's conquest (ca 333 BC) made Greek the language of the region. Most likely the book was written in the fourth century BC.

Special Features

Esther is a unique book. It is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God, although his presence is implied due to Mordecai's allusion to divine providence (4:14). At times the book seems rather secular; historically this has contributed to questions regarding its place in the canon of the synagogue and the church. Esther is tightly connected with specific historical events, yet it is also a piece of literature, a narrative with all of the literary features necessary to make it a great story. It is a book in which its purposes are not always explicitly stated but are derived from the story as a whole.

Extended Commentary

Esther 1-7

Vashti's Demotion (1:1–22) The Persian King Khshayarsha was known as Ahasuerus in Hebrew and Xerxes in Greek. He is commonly identified with Xerxes I (485–464 b.c.), who is remembered for his devastating naval loss to the Greeks at Salamis in 481. The Greek historian Herodotus described his kingdom as consisting of twenty provinces and extending from India to Ethiopia.

The king convened a royal reception in his third year (483 b.c.) at Susa of Elam (modern SW Iran), which was the winter resort of the Persian kings (Neh. 1:1; Dan. 8:2). Archaeological work has uncovered the elaborate royal palace of the city. The assembly Xerxes called lasted for 180 days, during which he displayed the splendor of his wealth. It culminated in a seven-day feast of luxurious dining and drunkenness. The opulence of the Persian court is described to indicate the vast resources and power of the king.

In a drunken stupor, the king called for Queen Vashti to “display her beauty” before his guests. Her refusal, probably out of decency, threatened the king’s reputation. At Memucan’s advice, the king deposed her. Xerxes’ action is a parody on Persian might, for the powerful king could not even command his own wife.

The King’s Decree (2:1–3:15) The second section of the story concerns the exaltation of Esther and the evil plot by Haman to exterminate the Jews. The role of Mordecai as Esther’s cousin and Haman’s hated enemy links the two episodes.

Queen Esther’s Rise (2:1–23). Xerxes, at his attendants’ advice, ordered a search for Vashti’s successor. The narrator revealed Esther’s nationality by first identifying Mordecai’s lineage as a Benjamite of the family of Kish. Mordecai was Esther’s foster parent and elder cousin. Esther (“Hadassah,” her Hebrew name) was among those brought to the king’s palace because of her exceptional beauty. At Mordecai’s advice she concealed her nationality, a factor that figured in her advantage over the enemy Haman.

One year of purification was required for an audience with the king. Esther was received by the king four years after the deposition of Vashti (479 b.c.; 2:16; 1:3). She won his approval and became queen. The western expedition against the Greeks by Xerxes’ Persian ships ended in disaster at Salamis in 481 b.c. His selection of Esther occurred after this debacle. Mordecai, who may have been in the king’s service as a gatekeeper, discovered a plot to kill Xerxes (perhaps because of disaffection over his losses at Salamis). The two culprits were hanged on gallows, and Mordecai’s heroism was recorded. From this incident Mordecai learned of Esther’s new power at court. The concealment of her identity and the record of Mordecai’s deed would lead to Haman’s eventual undoing (6:1–2; 7:3–6). The traitors’ gallows anticipated Haman’s own death for the same crime of treachery (7:10).

Haman’s Plan (3:1–15). The theme of power is continued by the introduction of Haman as second in position to the king. This incident took place about five years after the installation of Queen Esther (2:16; 3:7). Haman is identified as an “Agagite,” perhaps a descendant of the Amalekite king, Agag, who was defeated but spared by King Saul (1 Sam. 15). Israel and Amalek were enemies from Moses’ time (Exod. 17:8–16). For the author, the contention between Haman and Mordecai, a descendant of Kish (as was Saul), typified the enmity between Israel and the Gentiles. This Agagite, however, would not be spared.

While others bowed to Haman, Mordecai refused to worship him because of his Jewish faith—as Daniel had declined to worship Darius (Dan. 6). Haman masterminded a plot to exterminate all the Jews. The divinely appointed day and month was determined by the casting of the pur, meaning lot (Akkadian). The king was persuaded to permit the mass murder by official decree and sealed by the king’s own signet ring (see 8:2, 8). Couriers raced throughout the empire to deliver the decree that on the thirteenth day of Adar, some eleven months later, the Jews were to be destroyed. The common people of Susa were shocked by the cold-blooded decree in contrast to the conspirators, who meanwhile confidently celebrated.

Haman's Threat (4:1–5:14) Esther's position enabled her to save the Jews if she were willing to risk her own standing. After recounting Esther's vow of devotion, the author told how Esther took the lead and devised her own scheme to outmaneuver Haman. Ironically, Haman unwittingly devised his own end.

Mordecai's Plea (4:1–17). When Mordecai learned of the murderous plot, he and all the Jews joined in mourning, fasting, and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes. This spontaneous act of grief evidenced the solidarity of the Jews. The custom of sackcloth and ashes included prayers of confession and worship (1 Kgs. 21:27–29; Neh. 9:1–3; Dan. 9:3). Esther learned of the decree from her messenger Hathach, who relayed Mordecai's plea for her help. But Esther explained that she could not approach the king because Persian law meted out death to anyone entering uninvited. Mordecai answered by warning her that as a Jewess her own life was in jeopardy and that God could save His people by another means if she failed. He believed that her exaltation in the palace had a holy purpose. Esther's trust in God was the turning point. She requested a communal fast by all the Jews as they petitioned God (Ezra 8:21–23; see Acts 13:3; 14:23). She replied to Mordecai with courage and confidence in God's will: "If I perish, I perish" (see Dan. 3:16–18).

Mordecai Defeats Haman (6:1–7:10) This section features the key reversal in Haman's and Mordecai's fates. Mordecai was honored by the king, much to Haman's humiliation. The final indignity of foolish Haman was his pathetic effort to save himself from the gallows.

Mordecai Honored by Haman (6:1–14). The unstated reason for the king's insomnia was God's providence. To pass the sleepless night, servants brought the royal annals where Mordecai's deed of saving the king was read (see 2:19–23). Haman was consulted, but ironically his egotism caused him unintentionally to honor Mordecai. The depiction of Mordecai dressed in royalty and being led on horseback by Haman anticipates their inverted roles to come. Even his friends and wife voiced the theological proposition of the book: Mordecai is invincible because he is a Jew.

Haman's Hanging (7:1–10). Not only did Mordecai get the best of Haman, but Esther outsmarted him. On the following day, Esther assembled her guests for the second banquet, during which she revealed her entreaty (see 5:7–8). The fivefold repetition of "Queen Esther" in this chapter echoed Mordecai's plea that she had come to power for this moment (4:14). Alluding to Haman's bribe (3:9), she described herself and the Jews as "sold for destruction." She identified Haman as the adversary.

Haman, true to his character as a blundering dunce, begged for the queen's mercy, thus breaking protocol with the king's harem. He magnified his folly by stumbling to her couch, creating the appearance of improprieties and thereby sealing his doom with the irate king. The gallows, whose references tower over much of the narrative (2:23; 5:14; 7:9–10; 8:7; 9:13, 25), afforded the Jews their vindication by the hanging of Haman.

Mordecai's Plan (8:1–17). Rather than Jewish property falling into Haman's hands (3:13b), Haman's property and authority were given to Esther and Mordecai. But Haman's villainous plot remained, and Esther successfully pleaded for the king's assistance to avert the disaster. The decree Mordecai wrote gave the Jews the right to defend themselves. Mordecai took Haman's place as second to the king (8:15). Whereas the city of Susa was disturbed at Haman's decree (3:15), Mordecai's edict gladdened their hearts and converted some to the Jewish faith.¹

References

1. Kenneth A. Mathews, "The Historical Books," in *Holman Concise Bible Commentary*, ed. David S. Dockery (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 194–196.