

*Esther*

THE INVISIBLE  
KING

A Reader's Guide for the  
Book of Esther

*Esther*

**THE INVISIBLE  
KING**



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# INTRODUCTION

The book of Esther has long been a puzzle to pastors and theologians alike. This masterfully written short story takes a prominent place in the annals of ancient literature, detailing the interplay between love and war, power and position, and the fate of the entire nation of Israel. The story is set in the post-exilic period of Israel, while God's people remained captive to the Median-Persian empire, just after Ezra and Nehemiah had returned with a band of Jews to rebuild Jerusalem. Esther is a representative story of those Jews who stayed behind, choosing to live as exiles in the mostly comfortable clutches of the empire. The book is also the primary source document for the Jewish feast of Purim, and is a treasure among Jews even today.

But it seems completely out of place in the Bible. There is no mention of God anywhere within the book, no allusion to either worship or prayer being directed to anyone or anything, no Messianic prophecy, and no message from God to His people. In many ways, it's a tale of a secular history written by a secular person about a secular people. While it's beautifully written, it doesn't seem to fit within a common understanding of Divine Scripture. As Ray Stedman has said, "one might rather expect to find it in the pages of the Reader's Digest than the Bible."<sup>1</sup>

And yet... There it is, squeezed between the histories and the wisdom literature. (A not so subtle hint that even those who arranged the canon of Scripture centuries ago weren't exactly sure what to do with it!) Indeed, theologians have wrestled with foundational questions such as its authorship, purpose, historicity, and intended meaning. As a story, its value is unquestioned; as Scripture, the interrogation has been a bit more intense.

However, as I believe that we'll find throughout our study, there is much more to this beautifully written book than just its aesthetic appeal. Although God remains unmentioned and unseen, His Hand is evident throughout the story. Much like our lives, the stories of Mordecai, Haman, and Esther are happening on two separate planes simultaneously. There are the seen and visible

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<sup>1</sup> Ray Stedman, *The Queen and I: Studies in Esther*, (Word, Waco, TX, 1977.), pg. 7.

events of the story, which are evident to all. But there are also the unseen and invisible realities of God working out His purposes and plan for His honor and glory. While that plane may be quite a bit more difficult to see, it can be argued that there is no greater reality in all eternity.

Throughout this story, God is hidden from sight. For many of us, we deeply feel this reality in our daily lives as well. Mordecai and Esther go through incredible highs and deep, dark lows. The bad guy (Haman) often seems to be winning. The powers that be (King Ahasuerus) often seem to be self-absorbed and clueless. There is a constant struggle against the rule of an empire that controls a world that is both longed for and rejected at the same time. As exiles, there is a tension in seeking to live under the rule of an unseen King while being subject to the whims and laws of an erratic government that operates by a different set of values. Yet, while God may remain unseen, in the end His purposes prevail.

In short: this story is our story.

As we walk through "Esther & The Invisible King," there will be multiple opportunities to place your own name on the title line. While we can often feel alone and as though God is hidden from view, He is constantly at work behind the scenes. He is an ever-present Help for us. (Psalm 46:1) He is working all things together for good. (Romans 8:28) He is always with us, even to the end of the age. (Matthew 28:20)

In the powerful words of Francis Schaeffer, "He Is There, and He Is Not Silent."

Soli Deo Gloria,  
Brian Kannel  
York Alliance Church

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book is designed to be used as a companion resource to the 2016 sermon series at York Alliance Church. Each Sunday's message will provide the central teaching of the Scripture passage for that week. You will receive most benefit from this reader's guide as you utilize it in conjunction with both the Sunday messages and a weekly LIFE group gathering, a small community with whom you are able to discuss and apply these truths. If you are unable to attend one of the Sunday morning gatherings for any reason, the sermon audio can be found at [www.yorkalliance.org/resources](http://www.yorkalliance.org/resources).

Distinct from many of our study guides at York Alliance, this is actually a "reader's guide." You'll find in this book the complete text of the book of Esther in the English Standard Version<sup>2</sup> as well as a short series of devotional style questions to help you get the most out of reading the text. While most study guides are designed to dig deeply into the finer points of the text, this reader's guide is designed to point you back to overall narrative of the story, and particularly, the work of God in the midst of all the action and drama.

While the studies are laid out in "weeks" that will parallel the sermon series, you will find that you won't need to stop after each chapter unless you choose to do so. In fact, it's far easier to make the connections to God's work in the midst of the follies of the empire and both the sin and righteousness of His people when you can see each event within the context of the overall story. Just like in our own lives, it's far easier to discern God's hand when we know the end of the story. Therefore, you are encouraged to read the entire story at least once before you start utilizing this reader's guide—preferably in a different translation so that you can get the fullest meaning from the original text.

In addition to the text of Esther, you'll find three sets of questions that will help you to read and understand the text more fully, as well as several other tools that are intended to enhance your study of this book:

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<sup>2</sup> ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.



- “Digging In” questions will challenge you to think more specifically about the story itself. It’s easy, particularly with a well-written short story like Esther, to be caught up in the plot and miss the details that can help us to more fully appreciate all that’s happening. These questions encourage you to look back so you will have a fuller understanding of the story.
- “Seeing the Unseen” questions will point you toward the character and work of God, both in Esther’s story and in the entirety of redemptive history. Whether through the implicit work of God or the analogous story of God seen through the story of Esther, these questions will push you to look past the surface into the unseen reality of God’s work in His world.
- Finally, “Taking it Home” questions will ask you to apply the principles of this ancient story to your present day life. Paul reminds Timothy that “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness...” (2 Timothy 3:16), and the book of Esther is certainly no exception.
- Included with each week’s reading are blank sermon note sheets (for use on Sunday mornings and/or with the sermon audio available online) as well as a “Facilitation/ Application” sheet. While the primary intent of this page is that it be used within York Alliance Church LIFE groups, this resource can be used in a variety of other settings as well.

If you have questions about how to best utilize this reader’s guide, have comments on what you’re finding in it, or just want to report your experiences with using it, all are welcomed! Email me at [bkannel@yorkalliance.org](mailto:bkannel@yorkalliance.org).

*Lord Jesus, as we begin the study of this book, we must first admit that we can sometimes feel as if You’re not present in our daily lives. At times we are overwhelmed by the problems and cares of the world; at other times, we are simply too busy to even notice. However, we also confess the reality which we know to be true by faith: You are present, and You are working. Dozens of circumstances and seeming coincidences each day are evidences of Your active presence with us, if we will just open our eyes wide enough to recognize them. Our uncertainty, fear, and pain will not be the final verdict of our existence; but until then, we know that You are with us even in the midst of them. Our joys and victories in this life, while sweet and to be desired, will never truly last. In the end, we are all exiles, living in the midst of the empire—this world is not our home. Help us to live, with our eyes on You, as though we’re only passing through.*

*In Jesus’ Name, Amen.*

# CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

In order to be able to read the book of Esther and really understand the story in the way the author is intending, it's important to have some background. By keeping the context in mind, some of the intended themes and subtle nuances will emerge more clearly, and the behaviors of key characters such as King Ahasuerus, Haman, Mordecai, and Esther will make much more sense.

As with many ancient books, there isn't full agreement on every detail of the context. However, there is general agreement among scholars around where these events fit into the unfolding of world history. King Ahasuerus, as he's known throughout the story, is not his actual name. Rather, *Ahasuerus* is a title that simply means "Venerable Father."<sup>3</sup> Most scholars agree that Ahasuerus is actually the great Persian King Xerxes, who ruled the Persian empire from 486-465 B.C. Xerxes was the successor of King Darius, who is referenced in a variety of places in the Old Testament. Most notably, it was under the reign of Darius that the Jewish people, who had been conquered and exiled by the Babylonians (who were subsequently conquered by the Persians) were permitted to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Historically, the decree from King Darius that allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem happened in 539 B.C., with the completion of the rebuilt temple occurring in 516 B.C.<sup>4</sup> Relatively few Jews availed themselves of this opportunity (all of these events are recorded in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah), so by the time of Ahasuerus, there were still large numbers of Jews living in the Persian empire. The events of the book of Esther, the author tells us, unfold three years into the reign of Ahasuerus/Xerxes (Esther 1:3). Therefore, the historical timeline would look something like this:

- 539 B.C.      King Darius' edict that Jews can return to Jerusalem
- 516 B.C.      Rebuilt temple is completed
- 486 B.C.      King Ahasuerus/Xerxes takes the throne
- 483 B.C.      The events in Esther 1 take place

The cultural context is just as important to understand as the historical: Persia was the most dominant global empire that the world had ever seen up to this point in history, and Ahasuerus is

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<sup>3</sup> Ray Stedman, *The Queen and I: Studies in Esther*, (Word, Waco, TX, 1977.), pg. 10.

<sup>4</sup> Joyce Baldwin, *Esther: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, (IVP, Downer's Grove, IL, 1984.), pg. 17.

leading this global juggernaut. He is not only the most powerful man in the world; his power is completely uncontested and unchallenged. The Jews that chose to remain in Persia, despite living under a pagan government that sought to assimilate them into their empire, had settled in quite nicely and comfortably to life in Persia. In many ways, they had forgotten that they lived under the control of a fickle government that couldn't be trusted.<sup>5</sup> They enjoyed the unprecedented peace that the power of Persia afforded, and the relative prosperity that they shared as citizens of the empire. That, of course, led to a great temptation to forsake their identity as "God's chosen people" and simply "fit in" with the rest of the Persian empire.

If assimilation was one temptation, despair was another.<sup>6</sup> In those moments when the Jews recognized the precarious position they sat in under the control of an all-powerful empire that could turn on them at any moment, they were faced with the reality: the God rescued them from Egypt and parted the Red Sea had also sent them into exile... and had been seemingly silent for generations. As they lived under this pagan regime, was there any reason to maintain their distinctiveness as God's people? If God existed at all, hadn't He turned His back on His people generations ago? What hope was there against this all-powerful empire?

The book of Esther speaks into this context by first creating a caricature of the empire, pointing out its incredible excesses, bureaucracies, and impulsivity. Simultaneously, the book of Esther shows us the unseen providence of God, who is still involved in the mundane details of life in the Persian empire, and is still providing for His people. While God remains unnamed and unseen throughout the book, evidence of His activity is found everywhere. As Jesus tells Nicodemus: "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes." (John 3:8) Evidence of the wind of God is seen in every aspect of the great story of Esther. There is a visible king, Ahasuerus, leading a visible empire, Persia. But there is also an unseen King, ruling over an eternal empire. The book of Esther contrasts these two, and makes it abundantly clear that the eternal empire of God is far superior to even the greatest earthly kingdom.

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<sup>5</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2005.), pg. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

# WEEK ONE: GOD & THE EMPIRE

Persia and King Ahasuerus show us the glory and grandeur of the world, but they also show us the folly of the empire. Power, lust, greed, and pride drive each decision. Although every indication is that those who run the empire are in the complete control, there is an unseen King who is actually in control. God, while invisible to the story, is the real King.

## Esther 1<sup>7</sup>

### *The King's Banquets*

[1] Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the Ahasuerus who reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces, [2] in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel, [3] in the third year of his reign he gave a feast for all his officials and servants. The army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces were before him, [4] while he showed the riches of his royal glory and the splendor and pomp of his greatness for many days, 180 days. [5] And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. [6] There were white cotton curtains and violet hangings fastened with cords of fine linen and purple to silver rods and marble pillars, and also couches of gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones. [7] Drinks were served in golden vessels, vessels of different kinds, and the royal wine was lavished according to the bounty of the king. [8] And drinking was according to this edict: "There is no compulsion." For the king had given orders to all the staff of his palace to do as each man desired. [9] Queen Vashti also gave a feast for the women in the palace that belonged to King Ahasuerus.

### *Queen Vashti's Refusal*

[10] On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carkas, the seven eunuchs who served in the presence of King Ahasuerus, [11] to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was lovely to look at. [12] But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. At this the king became enraged, and his anger burned within him.

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<sup>7</sup> Scripture is from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

[13] Then the king said to the wise men who knew the times (for this was the king's procedure toward all who were versed in law and judgment, [14] the men next to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and sat first in the kingdom): [15] "According to the law, what is to be done to Queen Vashti, because she has not performed the command of King Ahasuerus delivered by the eunuchs?" [16] Then Memucan said in the presence of the king and the officials, "Not only against the king has Queen Vashti done wrong, but also against all the officials and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. [17] For the queen's behavior will be made known to all women, causing them to look at their husbands with contempt, since they will say, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him, and she did not come.' [18] This very day the noble women of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's behavior will say the same to all the king's officials, and there will be contempt and wrath in plenty. [19] If it please the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be repealed, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus. And let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. [20] So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, for it is vast, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike." [21] This advice pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed. [22] He sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man be master in his own household and speak according to the language of his people.

### Digging In

- Picture the feast described at the beginning of chapter 1. How is it possible to have a feast that lasts 180 days? What must that have meant about the political context surrounding Persia?
  
- Read vs. 8. What does it say about a government when an edict must be passed to allow guests at a feast to do anything that they pleased?

- Look at the listings of names beginning in vs. 10 and continuing through vs. 14. What picture does this listing of people create in your mind?
  
- What state of mind does the King seem to be in when he orders Queen Vashti to appear? (Some scholars believe that “with her royal crown” indicates that he desired that she appear before these men with nothing else apart from her crown!<sup>8</sup> While that’s a bit beyond the text, the offensiveness of the order seems to be on the mark.)
  
- What “problem” does the counsel of Ahasuerus see in Vashti’s refusal?
  
- Re-read the edict that is first recommended and then ultimately made by the King. What is it saying? Is it even possible for such an edict to be enforced?
  
- Now look at the way the edict is handled, using the significant resources of Persian government. What is the unintended consequence of the proclamation? Look back at vs. 17. Is this concern more or less a reality after the edict is sent to every home in the empire?

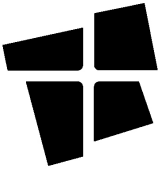
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<sup>8</sup> Charles Swindoll, *Esther: A Woman of Strength and Dignity*, (Word, Nashville, TN, 1997.), pg. 26.









# GOD & THE EMPIRE

## Esther 1

Sermon Notes:

## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the biggest party you've ever been invited to (or thrown)?"

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 1

- How have you seen God at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Are there worldly excesses that you, either consciously or subconsciously, believe will truly satisfy you?
- How do you react when God seems to be silent or absent? What are some things that you could do to remind you of the truth?
- Are there aspects of the world around you that tempt you toward either compromising the call of God or feeling that following Jesus is a hopeless endeavor?
- What parts of our political and cultural context are actually humorous if we'll step back and look at them honestly?
- How can we help one another as a group encourage one another to respond to Jesus' invitation to the banquet that He gives us?

**World:** We spent much of our study this week looking at parties. While the parties that we read about aren't necessarily the best kind of party, throwing a party is a great way to connect with friends and neighbors! Consider what it would look like for your group to throw a party and invite some of the people for whom you've been praying God's blessing in their lives. For many, your invitation and this party may be part of that blessing! Pray intentionally for the party, and take time to plan it well.

Note: Please check [www.yorkalliance.org](http://www.yorkalliance.org), register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

# WEEK TWO: EXILES & THE EMPIRE

Living as exiles in the midst of the empire isn't easy; and yet, with just a few compromises, life isn't too bad. Heroes, even great heroes of the faith, are still human, and we immediately recognize that life is messy. The empire tempts the exile toward either assimilation or despair, but the only real hope we have as exiles is in the reality of a future Kingdom.

## Esther 2

### *Esther Chosen Queen*

[1] After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. [2] Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. [3] And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. [4] And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

[5] Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, [6] who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. [7] He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. [8] So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. [9] And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. [10] Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. [11] And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

[12] Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women – [13] when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she

desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. [14] In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

[15] When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. [16] And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, [17] the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. [18] Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

### *Mordecai Discovers a Plot*

[19] Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. [20] Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. [21] In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. [22] And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. [23] When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

### Digging In

- Look at vs. 1, and then at vs. 16. When did "After these things" (vs. 1) actually happen? Reference the timeline found on pg. 9.

*Historical footnote: While the book of Esther doesn't mention it, history tells us that during these four years that elapsed between chapter 1 and chapter 2, King Ahasuerus/Xerxes made a "disastrous attempt to conquer Greece. [So] these events took place after he had led an expedition against Greece and returned home to Susa in defeat."<sup>9</sup>*

- Based on this historical understanding, what might Ahasuerus looking for in a Queen?
  
- What does this "contest for queen" seem to be solely based upon?
  
- Read vs. 5-6. Would Mordecai have firsthand experience about living in the Promised Land?
  
- What does Mordecai command Esther in regards to her heritage?
  
- Read Daniel 1:8-16. How does Esther's response to the empire compare to Daniel's?
  
- Is Mordecai rewarded in any way for uncovering the plot against the king?

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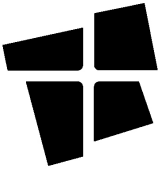
<sup>9</sup> Charles Swindoll, *Esther: A Woman of Strength and Dignity*, (Word, Nashville, TN, 1997.), pg. 34.





## Taking it Home

- How does your approach to God parallel Ahasuerus' desire for a queen? Are there times when you are more apt to "desire God" than other times?
  
- What are some behaviors and attitudes that are consistently parts of your life but can be seen as a compromise based on who you are as a believer in Jesus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Where are some situations in your life that it's hard to believe that God is at work? How might He be working even though you can't see Him?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Do you at times feel as though God has forgotten about you? How does Romans 8:31-39 help us to not compromise or to give up hope?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- What are ways that you can remind yourself of the faithfulness of God, even when He seems absent?



# EXILES & THE EMPIRE

## Esther 2

Sermon Notes:

## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "Have you ever won a contest? Have you ever entered one that you really wanted to win?"

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 2

- How has Jesus worked in your life this week?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- How does your approach to God parallel Ahasuerus' desire for a queen? Are there times when you are more apt to "desire God" than other times?
- What are some behaviors and attitudes that are consistently parts of your life but can be seen as a compromise based on who you are as a believer in Jesus?
- Where are some situations in your life that it's hard to believe that God is at work? How might He be working even though you can't see Him?
- Do you at times feel as though God has forgotten about you? How does Romans 8:31-39 help us to not compromise or to give up hope?
- What are ways that we can remind one another of the faithfulness of God, even when He seems absent?

**World:** Continue party planning, and pray intentionally about who God may be asking you to invite, or to be connected with in some other context. There are times that His plans are very counter-intuitive to ours! Pray intentionally over one another's lives, and ask God to clearly direct you to those to whom He is calling you to be a blessing. As you finalize your plans, pray intentionally for all those in your life to whom God is calling you to be a blessing.

Note: Please check [www.yorkalliance.org](http://www.yorkalliance.org), register for our weekly newsletter, and get information on coming events and activities.

# WEEK THREE: STANDING AGAINST THE EMPIRE

An old family feud that was never resolved gives way to an interpersonal conflict that will ultimately lead to a genocidal edict. Although the story is still young, all hope is already lost. A foolish and impulsive king contrasts with the wise and merciful King. The unjust edict of death is bought with a price; and the just edict of life exacts as great price as well.

### Esther 3

#### *Haman Plots Against the Jews*

[1] After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. [2] And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. [3] Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" [4] And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. [5] And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. [6] But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

[7] In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. [8] Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. [9] If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." [10] So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. [11] And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you."

[12] Then the king's scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king's satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus

and sealed with the king's signet ring. [13] Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. [14] A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. [15] The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

### Digging In

*Note: While the narrative in Esther 3 is largely straightforward, there is a need to connect this narrative to a variety of different portions of history of Israel in order to really understand what's happening in this section.*

- Based on the last verse in Esther 2, whose promotion would you expect to read about in Esther 3:1? Why?
  
- While Mordecai has been overlooked by the King, it seems unlikely that's the only reason he refuses to bow to Haman.
  - What ethnicity is Haman?
  
  - Read Exodus 17:6-18 and 1 Samuel 15. Why would an Agagite, descended from King Agag of the Amalekites, present a problem for a Jew?
  
  - Now re-read Esther 2:5 and then read 1 Samuel 9:1-2. Why might bowing to Haman be particularly difficult for Mordecai?

- How does Haman determine the best day for the extermination of the Jews?

*(While this seems like a very strange practice, "the casting of lots to determine a lucky day on which to do something was common practice in Oriental kingdoms."<sup>10</sup>)*

- How does Haman describe the effect of the Jewish people on King Ahasuerus? What sum does he offer to him for the right to destroy them? *(A sum that was more than half of the annual tax revenue of the entire empire.<sup>11</sup>)*

- What does King Ahasuerus say to Haman about the Jewish people? In what way does that show an overestimation of his influence as King?

- How long would it be between the edict that the King issued and the annihilation of the Jews?

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<sup>10</sup> Ray Stedman, *The Queen and I: Studies in Esther*, (Word, Waco, TX, 1977.), pg. 35.

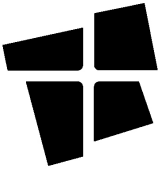
<sup>11</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2005.), pg. 39.





## Taking it Home

- Ahasuerus chose profit and gain over righteousness—are there times you make choices that prefer gain (material or otherwise) over what you know is best? Can you think of an example?
  
- Are there ways that we as a culture choose affluence and comfort over what's right, sometimes without bothering to find all of the facts? How does this connect to the decision Ahasuerus made?
  
- In what ways is your life like a letter written by God to the world around you? What message do you think it's giving?
  
- Are there future events in your life that seem right now to be inevitable, but in which God may simply be creating space for you to see His glory?



# STANDING AGAINST THE EMPIRE

## Esther 3

Sermon Notes:

## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the most impactful piece of national news (good or bad) that you remember in your lifetime?"

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 3

- How have you seen Jesus at work around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Ahasuerus chose profit and gain over righteousness—are there times you make choices that prefer gain (material or otherwise) over what you know is best? Can you think of an example?
- Are there ways that we as a culture choose affluence and comfort over what's right, sometimes without bothering to find all of the facts? How does this connect to the decision Ahasuerus made?
- In what ways is your life like a letter written by God to the world around you? What message do you think it's giving?
- Are there future events in your life that seem right now to be inevitable, but in which God may simply be creating space for you to see His glory?
- In what ways are we good at supporting one another in times of confusion and when times are difficult? Are there ways we need to improve?

**World:** Jesus says that it's by our love that the world will know that we follow Him. (John 13:35) That love is maybe best seen in the way we love one another through difficulty and pain. Take time to pray for one another *and then* commit to asking one person in your life how you as a group can pray for them in the coming week. Report back to the group next week, and actually pray for them!

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# WEEK FOUR: A MEDIATOR

In the most famous proposition of this story, Esther is given the choice to stand up for her people using the position that she has been given. The fasting and prayer of her people are meaningless without the presence of a mediator to make an appeal before the King. The great Mediator stands before the King on our behalf, and we are afforded a position that leads to a choice of our own.

## Esther 4

### *Esther Agrees to Help the Jews*

[1] When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. [2] He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. [3] And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes.

[4] When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. [5] Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. [6] Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, [7] and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. [8] Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her people. [9] And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. [10] Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, [11] "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days."

[12] And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. [13] Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, "Do not think to yourself that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. [14] For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you

have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" [15] Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, [16] "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish." [17] Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

### Digging In

- As you read Esther 4, can you find any explicit mention of prayer or help from God?
  
- From which King is Mordecai hoping to gain help for his people?
  
- In Mordecai's response to Esther, where might he think deliverance would arise from if not Esther? Whose greater plan might Mordecai be referring to when he challenges Esther to action?
  
- In your opinion, why doesn't Mordecai (or Esther) mention God specifically?

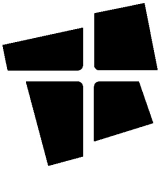
## Seeing the Unseen

- Think about Esther's life: she's hidden her Jewishness, broken all dietary and cleanliness restrictions place on Jews, entered into the King's harem, married a pagan, and isolated herself almost completely from the community of Israel. Why might she not be confident that she would be the vehicle through which God would save His people?
  
- Why might the initial response of Mordecai and the Jews have been fasting?
  
- We, too, are under the sentence of death. (Ezekiel 18:4, Romans 6:23) In what ways is Jesus a better Mediator for us than Esther is for the Jews?
  
- What exactly does Esther request the Jews in Susa do, along with her and her young women, before she approaches the King? How might that absolute fast parallel Matthew 12:40?

## Taking it Home

- Are there times that you feel like your past behavior disqualifies you from being used by God?  
How does Esther's story speak into that feeling?
  
- What are some positions that God has placed you in that He might desire to use for His purposes?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Are there ways in which you need to be willing to "perish" in order to be truly used by God in these areas?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- If God is going to provide relief and deliverance from "another place" regardless, why is it important for you to be involved in God's plan?





**A MEDIATOR**  
Esther 4

Sermon Notes:



## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What are you most looking forward to about summer?"

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 4

- Where has God been evident around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Are there times that you feel like your past behavior disqualifies you from being used by God? How does Esther's story speak into that feeling?
- What are some positions that God has placed you in that He might desire to use for His purposes?
- Are there ways in which you need to be willing to "perish" in order to be truly used by God in these areas?
- If God is going to provide relief and deliverance from "another place" regardless, why is it important for you to be involved in God's plan?
- How can we encourage one another on a day-by-day and week-by-week basis to be involved in God's plan for our world?

**World:** What a position God has placed us in! You have the opportunity, coming out of last week, to pray very specifically for someone who needs to have a part of their lives touched by the King—so pray for them! You have the opportunity, through the party you've been planning from the beginning of this study, to invite people into a loving community of faith—so if you haven't finalized party plans and invitations yet, do it! God calls us to put our faith and belief into action, so don't just pray for those around you—love them in Jesus' Name!

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# WEEK FIVE: THE PRESENCE OF THE KING

The great tension Esther faces is the reaction of an impulsive and unpredictable king. Even when invited in, she is forced to employ all her skill and tact to gain a favorable outcome. The open invitation into the presence of the King and His pleasure toward us can easily be squandered as we employ our human strength to the Divine problems we were never meant to solve on our own.

## Esther 5

### *Esther Prepares a Banquet*

[1] On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. [2] And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. [3] And the king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." [4] And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king." [5] Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked." So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. [6] And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." [7] Then Esther answered, "My wish and my request is: [8] If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."

### *Haman Plans to Hang Mordecai*

[9] And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. [10] Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. [11] And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. [12] Then Haman said, "Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. [13] Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." [14] Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in

the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast." This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

### Digging In

- What is Esther's initial request of King Ahasuerus?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Once Ahasuerus and Haman are at the banquet, what is her second request?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Why might this have been a good move for King Ahasuerus, based on what we know of him? What about for Haman?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- After Haman is again ignored by Mordecai, what does Haman do at home? Why might he have reacted that way?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- Why is the specific advice given to Haman in line with what is known about his character and motivations? (*Hint: 50 cubits is roughly equal to 7.5 stories high*)

## Seeing the Unseen

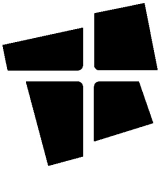
- Read Hebrews 10:19-22. How does Esther's approach to King Ahasuerus contrast with the invitation that we have to approach the King of the Universe?
  
- Although still unseen, why might it have been God who prompted Esther to request a second banquet rather than make her request immediately?
  
- Why might have Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman elicit such a strong response following the banquet with the King and Queen?
  
- Would the large gallows suggested, while certainly an attempt at "giant-sized vengeance" on Mordecai<sup>12</sup>, have a result of drawing attention to Haman, or to Mordecai? How does this parallel the way it works when we try to fix our idolatries on our own?

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<sup>12</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2005.), pg. 67.







# THE PRESENCE OF THE KING

## Esther 5

Sermon Notes:



## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "How would you spend \$100,000 if it was given to you today, you had to spend it by tomorrow, and you couldn't save or invest it?"

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 5

- How has Jesus been at work in your life?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- What gets in the way of you coming into the presence of God through prayer?
- Do you tend to rush into fixing problems directly, or do you act more indirectly? What are some occasions in your life when the indirect approach fits more with God's will and plan?
- What are some areas in your own life where your emotional reaction to an offense is outsized compared to the offense itself? Does that reaction point you toward an idol in your life?
- What are some ways that you try to attack idolatry in your own life but end up making the problem worse rather than fixing it?
- Do the people in this group help build up your idols, or help to crush them? In what ways?

**World:** If we are to use the position that God has given us in Christ in a way that allows Him to impact people's eternities through us, it will require us learning to listen and hear His voice. Pray specifically for the people you will come in contact with in the next few days—ask God to give you an ear that can clearly hear His voice, and then to have the courage to obey His call.

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# WEEK SIX: THE POWER OF INSOMNIA

In a story full of dramatic tension and heroic activity, everything hinges on one sleepless night. The real King, remaining unseen, is orchestrating every detail so that His man is honored and His enemy is humiliated. In the midst of the most hopeless of situations, we have a King who is interested and involved in the smallest details—and is working them out for His glory and our joy.

## Esther 6

### *The King Honors Mordecai*

[1] On that night the king could not sleep. And he gave orders to bring the book of memorable deeds, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. [2] And it was found written how Mordecai had told about Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, and who had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. [3] And the king said, "What honor or distinction has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" The king's young men who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him." [4] And the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace to speak to the king about having Mordecai hanged on the gallows that he had prepared for him. [5] And the king's young men told him, "Haman is there, standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in." [6] So Haman came in, and the king said to him, "What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?" And Haman said to himself, "Whom would the king delight to honor more than me?" [7] And Haman said to the king, "For the man whom the king delights to honor, [8] let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. [9] And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: 'Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.'" [10] Then the king said to Haman, "Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king's gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned." [11] So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, "Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor."

[12] Then Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman hurried to his house, mourning and with his head covered. [13] And Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him."

[14] While they were yet talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hurried to bring Haman to the feast that Esther had prepared.

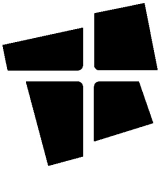
### Digging In

- As you think about the narrative at the end of chapter 5, is there any hope you can see in the situation for Mordecai? When does Haman intend to hang him?
  
- Is Esther mentioned in this pivotal chapter of the book bearing her name? Is Mordecai's role in the chapter an active one, or a passive one?
  
- List the "coincidences" that are found in this chapter.
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- In what way do Haman's wife and friends acknowledge God even more than many of the Jews do throughout the book of Esther?









# THE POWER OF INSOMNIA

## Esther 6

Sermon Notes:



## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "Do you prefer to get up early or sleep in?"

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 6

- Where have you see Jesus working in your life?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- When do you find it most difficult to truly trust God to work in your life and in the world around you?
- Can you think of a time where God has worked in your life through a series of very ordinary events? Why are these so easy for us to miss?
- Why is it so hard to wait for God's justice and vengeance, as well as God's reward?
- What are some ways that your life is identified as one whom the King delights to honor? Are people able to tell *whose* you are as easily as they can tell *who* you are? Why or why not?
- How can we help remind each other of the sovereignty of God in our lives even when things aren't going the way that we think they should?

**World:** God has placed you exactly where you are and exactly "when" you are in order for you to represent Him to the world around you. Think about the opportunities that He's given to you, and those that could be coming in the week ahead. Pray intentionally for the wisdom and discernment to know the opportunities that He gives you when He gives them. Pray specifically for those whom you know you will encounter in the coming week.

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# WEEK SEVEN: A GREAT FALL

The human king may have been prepared by the Divine, but there is still work that must be done. In swift fashion, human decision accords with Divine sovereignty, and the mightiest of mortals falls from a great height. The empire can never fulfill its promises. Our greatest earthly security is faulty and precarious. But if our King is for us, nothing can ever stand against us.

## Esther 7

[1] So the king and Haman went in to feast with Queen Esther. [2] And on the second day, as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king again said to Esther, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." [3] Then Queen Esther answered, "If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request. [4] For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated. If we had been sold merely as slaves, men and women, I would have been silent, for our affliction is not to be compared with the loss to the king." [5] Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther, "Who is he, and where is he, who has dared to do this?" [6] And Esther said, "A foe and enemy! This wicked Haman!" Then Haman was terrified before the king and the queen.

### *Haman Is Hanged*

[7] And the king arose in his wrath from the wine-drinking and went into the palace garden, but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm was determined against him by the king. [8] And the king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine, as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was. And the king said, "Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?" As the word left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman's face. [9] Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs in attendance on the king, said, "Moreover, the gallows that Haman has prepared for Mordecai, whose word saved the king, is standing at Haman's house, fifty cubits high." [10] And the king said, "Hang him on that." So they hanged Haman on the gallows that he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the wrath of the king abated.

## Digging In

- Read Esther's petition carefully. What "new" information (which she had previously kept secret) does she disclose to the King by the wording she uses in her petition?
  
- With what states does Esther contrast the position of being "destroyed, killed, and annihilated?" Do you see the irony in her statement, considering her path to her position as Queen?
  
- Go back and look at Esther 3:13. Why does Esther use the wording that she does?
  
- While Esther points the finger at Haman as the one responsible for this edict, all of them understood that it couldn't have become law unless the King signed it. With this in mind, why might have Ahasuerus gone for a walk just at the moment this came to light?
  
- Go back and look at the words of Haman's wife and advisors in Esther 6:13. How does this become a literal reality when the King returns?

## Seeing the Unseen

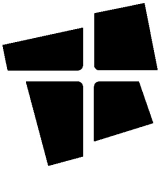
- The story of Esther really hinges on a sleepless night for the king<sup>13</sup>, which is clearly the work of God, not man. However, does Esther still have work that she is called to do in order to fulfill God's plan? What work?
  
- What does the King's response, while desirable for the Jews, show us about his character?
  
- Read Numbers 23:19, Hebrews 13:8, and James 1:17. How is God different than King Ahasuerus?
  
- Are the charges Ahasuerus ultimately "convicts" Haman on even accurate and just? Based on Galatians 3:13, what's another way that we are invited to contrast Ahasuerus with God?

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<sup>13</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2005.), pg. 91.







# A GREAT FALL

## Esther 7

Sermon Notes:



## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's your favorite party food?"

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 7

- How has God been at work in the world around you?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- Do you tend to err on the side of doing too much in your own strength or waiting on God and being lazy?
- In what way does the never-changing character of God impact your day-to-day living? How should it?
- How does the contrast between divine sovereignty and human effort play out in your pursuit of Jesus and following God's call to holiness?
- What are some impossible situations in your life in which you need God to intervene? Is your response to that situation balanced between both prayer and action, or are you leaning toward one side or another?

**World:** God has called us to be involved in His plan to reconcile the world back to Himself. In fact, He's even given us a job title: "Christ's Ambassador" (2 Corinthians 5:20) Talk about, and then pray about, what it would look like for you to take that job seriously in the coming week. How would your life look different? How would it change the way people see you and the way they interact with you? Pray for the boldness to live according to the job title you've been given!

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# WEEK EIGHT: A NEW EDICT

The tension resolved, the pieces begin to fall into place. The new edict brings joy and confidence in place of fear and despair. However, unlike this new edict, the edict over our lives doesn't require us to simply align with set of beliefs or identify with a group of people. Escape from judgment requires being transformed by the One who takes the judgment on our behalf.

## Esther 8

### *Esther Saves the Jews*

[1] On that day King Ahasuerus gave to Queen Esther the house of Haman, the enemy of the Jews. And Mordecai came before the king, for Esther had told what he was to her. [2] And the king took off his signet ring, which he had taken from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai. And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman.

[3] Then Esther spoke again to the king. She fell at his feet and wept and pleaded with him to avert the evil plan of Haman the Agagite and the plot that he had devised against the Jews. [4] When the king held out the golden scepter to Esther, [5] Esther rose and stood before the king. And she said, "If it please the king, and if I have found favor in his sight, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I am pleasing in his eyes, let an order be written to revoke the letters devised by Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, which he wrote to destroy the Jews who are in all the provinces of the king. [6] For how can I bear to see the calamity that is coming to my people? Or how can I bear to see the destruction of my kindred?" [7] Then King Ahasuerus said to Queen Esther and to Mordecai the Jew, "Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the gallows, because he intended to lay hands on the Jews. [8] But you may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring, for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked."

[9] The king's scribes were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day. And an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded concerning the Jews, to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, 127 provinces, to each province in its own script and to each people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. [10] And he wrote in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed it with the king's signet ring. Then he sent the letters by mounted couriers riding on swift horses that were used in the king's service, bred from the royal stud, [11] saying that the king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any



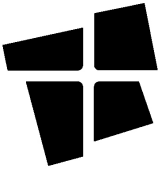






## Taking it Home

- How does your life look when it's being driven by seeking to adhere to the "law of sin and death?" How does it look when it's being driven by the "law of the Spirit of life?" Can you tell the difference?
  
- What are some ways that you can maintain perspective on God's hatred for sin and His call to righteousness?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- How would the people around you describe your attitude about life? Is that reflective of the reality of the work of Jesus on your behalf? Why or why not?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
- In what ways might God be calling you to live boldly because the entire penalty for sin has been absorbed by Jesus?



A NEW EDICT  
Esther 8

Sermon Notes:

## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "Have you ever gotten a traffic ticket? For what?" (Kids: "Have you ever gotten in trouble at school? For what?")

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 8

- Where have you seen God at work in your life?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- How does your life look when it's being driven by seeking to adhere to the "law of sin and death?" How does it look when it's being driven by the "law of the Spirit of life?" Can you tell the difference?
- What are some ways that you can maintain perspective on God's hatred for sin and His call to righteousness?
- How would the people around you describe your attitude about life? Is that reflective of the reality of the work of Jesus on your behalf? Why or why not?
- In what ways might God be calling you to live boldly because the entire penalty for sin has been absorbed by Jesus?
- How can we encourage one another to live boldly, trusting in God's sovereignty, and not be lured into living "safe" lives?

**World:** One interpretation of the end of Esther 8 is that the joy that the Jews had was so attractive to those around them that they literally desired to become Jewish. Is the joy and freedom that you have in Christ that contagious? Ask God to give you a love for others and hope in Christ that is visible to the world around you; then, pray 1 Peter 3:15 for one another—that we would be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have!

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# WEEK NINE: THE GRAND REVERSAL

In a foreshadowing of the ultimate Reversal, the enemy of God's people is destroyed and blessing pours down upon them. However, they are quickly reminded that they are still subjects of the empire, and that their glorious hope is still to come. The institution of Purim calls us to consider both our fasting and our feasting, and to live in the light of a coming Kingdom.

## Esther 9-10

### *The Jews Destroy Their Enemies*

[1] Now in the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day of the same, when the king's command and edict were about to be carried out, on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain the mastery over them, the reverse occurred: the Jews gained mastery over those who hated them. [2] The Jews gathered in their cities throughout all the provinces of King Ahasuerus to lay hands on those who sought their harm. And no one could stand against them, for the fear of them had fallen on all peoples. [3] All the officials of the provinces and the satraps and the governors and the royal agents also helped the Jews, for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on them. [4] For Mordecai was great in the king's house, and his fame spread throughout all the provinces, for the man Mordecai grew more and more powerful. [5] The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying them, and did as they pleased to those who hated them. [6] In Susa the citadel itself the Jews killed and destroyed 500 men, [7] and also killed Parshandatha and Dalphon and Aspatha [8] and Poratha and Adalia and Aridatha [9] and Parmashta and Arisai and Aridai and Vaizatha, [10] the ten sons of Haman the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews, but they laid no hand on the plunder.

[11] That very day the number of those killed in Susa the citadel was reported to the king. [12] And the king said to Queen Esther, "In Susa the citadel the Jews have killed and destroyed 500 men and also the ten sons of Haman. What then have they done in the rest of the king's provinces! Now what is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what further is your request? It shall be fulfilled." [13] And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict. And let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows." [14] So the king commanded this to be done. A decree was issued in Susa, and the ten sons of Haman were hanged. [15] The Jews who were in Susa gathered also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar and they killed 300 men in Susa, but they laid no hands on the plunder.

[16] Now the rest of the Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and got relief from their enemies and killed 75,000 of those who hated them, but they laid no hands on the plunder. [17] This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth day they rested and made that a day of feasting and gladness. [18] But the Jews who were in Susa gathered on the thirteenth day and on the fourteenth, and rested on the fifteenth day, making that a day of feasting and gladness. [19] Therefore the Jews of the villages, who live in the rural towns, hold the fourteenth day of the month of Adar as a day for gladness and feasting, as a holiday, and as a day on which they send gifts of food to one another.

### *The Feast of Purim Inaugurated*

[20] And Mordecai recorded these things and sent letters to all the Jews who were in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus, both near and far, [21] obliging them to keep the fourteenth day of the month Adar and also the fifteenth day of the same, year by year, [22] as the days on which the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; that they should make them days of feasting and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

[23] So the Jews accepted what they had started to do, and what Mordecai had written to them. [24] For Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them, and had cast Pur (that is, cast lots), to crush and to destroy them. [25] But when it came before the king, he gave orders in writing that his evil plan that he had devised against the Jews should return on his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows. [26] Therefore they called these days Purim, after the term Pur. Therefore, because of all that was written in this letter, and of what they had faced in this matter, and of what had happened to them, [27] the Jews firmly obligated themselves and their offspring and all who joined them, that without fail they would keep these two days according to what was written and at the time appointed every year, [28] that these days should be remembered and kept throughout every generation, in every clan, province, and

city, and that these days of Purim should never fall into disuse among the Jews, nor should the commemoration of these days cease among their descendants.

[29] Then Queen Esther, the daughter of Abihail, and Mordecai the Jew gave full written authority, confirming this second letter about Purim. [30] Letters were sent to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom of Ahasuerus, in words of peace and truth, [31] that these days of Purim should be observed at their appointed seasons, as Mordecai the Jew and Queen Esther obligated them, and as they had obligated themselves and their offspring, with regard to their fasts and their lamenting. [32] The command of Queen Esther confirmed these practices of Purim, and it was recorded in writing.

### *The Greatness of Mordecai*

[1] King Ahasuerus imposed tax on the land and on the coastlands of the sea. [2] And all the acts of his power and might, and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the Book of the Chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia? [3] For Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Ahasuerus, and he was great among the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brothers, for he sought the welfare of his people and spoke peace to all his people.

*Note: This account with its abundant violence and killing is difficult for us to understand in our age. However, throughout the Old Testament, as well as in the future as recorded in Revelation 19, God uses force to bring about the utter destruction of His enemies. While the specific practices and moral implications of "holy war" are far outside the scope of this study, it's important for the reader to understand that there are two distinct practices that always followed its completion: praise to God for His victory, and the participant's not taking any plunder from the war. The latter of these practices is heavily emphasized in Esther 9, but, keeping in the mysterious style of Esther, God is not mentioned. In our current age, however, God has called us not into a physical battle, but a spiritual one. (Ephesians 6:10-20)*

## Digging In

- Look back at Esther 5:11. What has happened to the achievements that Haman boasted about?
  
- When the king offers Esther another request to be granted, for what does she ask? What repeated phrase emphasizes that this is not vengeance, but God's judgment?
  
- Contrast the annual celebration established in this chapter with the fasting and despair found in Esther 4. Which one of them, as recorded, points to God?
  
- Chapter 10 is seen almost as a footnote to the story. What is the primary action that it records?
  
- Based on what we have learned about the empire, is this tax something that will be used for the good of the people? Why or why not?



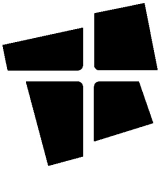
## Seeing the Unseen

- When these two edicts finally clashed, which one came out on top? How is this a foreshadowing of Romans 8:2? What “work” did the Jews still need to do in order to have the victory? How does this parallel Romans 8:2?
  
- Many see a clear tie between Esther 9 and 1 Samuel 15. Look at both chapters—why might there be a tie between the two?
  
- Read Mordecai’s written account of these events in vs. 24-25. Do they line up with the history that we just read? While they read more like a summary of all that happened, is Ahasuerus’ name mentioned? Could Mordecai be slyly pointing us to another King... that’s unseen?<sup>14</sup>
  
- What does the imposition of the tax from Ahasuerus remind us is still true, even in light of the victory of the Jews over their enemies? How does this parallel our situation?

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<sup>14</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Esther & Ruth*, (P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, NJ, 2005.), pg. 119.





# THE GRAND REVERSAL

Esther 9-10

Sermon Notes:



## LIFE Group Facilitation Sheet

**Welcome** one another in Jesus' name!

Icebreaker: "What's the most excited you ever remember being?"

**Worship** Jesus through Scripture, music, singing, and prayer. Be creative! Invite Him to the center of your gathering.

**Word:** Esther 9-10

- How has Jesus been evident in your life this week?
- Has anything specific jumped out to you, either in this passage or in the study guide this week?
- In what ways are you tenacious in your fight against the sinful nature? In what ways are you a little too lax?
- Are there times during your day or areas of your life where you completely forget about God? Why do you think that happens?
- Both "fasting" and "feasting" attitudes are part of a healthy rhythm in our approach to God. Which area in your life is most God-honoring? Why?
- What are some ways that we can maintain a posture of joy and victory through Jesus in spite of the broken world around us?
- How might we as a group both fast and feast together in the coming season?

**World:** We have been given peace and victory through Jesus, and the world around us is invited into that reality! As you've prayed throughout this study, be intentional about praying for the blessing of Jesus to be fully realized by those you come in contact with during your daily living. Ask God to give you one specific person to pray for and then commit to praying for them intentionally! Consider sharing first names with a prayer partner in your group, and then praying in an intentional way for them throughout the remainder of the summer.

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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The book of Esther is fascinating on so many levels. The parallels to our lives abound, from the experience of living as exiles and foreigners in the midst of an empire that operates on a different set of values, to the personal battle we each face between our sin nature and the Spirit within us. Using the form of a reading guide, instead of a traditional study guide, has also had both its joys and challenges, but it has hopefully allowed the beauty and artistic quality of this ancient short story to come alive more fully. Like all good art, the substance is found much more within the whole than when it's diced up in parts so that it can be systematized and inspected. My prayer is that the beauty of the story remains intact while still speaking into each of our lives individually.

There are always lots of people to thank with any project, and this one is no exception. First of all, I want to thank the people at Crossway for granting permission to use the entire ESV text of Esther within this reading guide. Thanks to Nancy for connecting all of the dots to make that happen, and for making so many other details happen as well. As always, a huge thank you to the whole staff, who consistently give me grace during writing periods, and cover for me in a myriad of ways during those weeks where I hole up and become strangely absent. I also want to thank our Governing Board and Elders for the continued evaluation and support of these studies, and for giving me the freedom to attempt Biblical education in new ways.

There are many artists who unknowingly contributed to this project: The Gray Havens new album "Ghost of a King" played again and again through the writing process. Half the album is really good—the other half is the best thing I've heard so far this year. Great job, Dave and Licia! Also—Mount Valor (check Kyle out at [www.mountvalor.com](http://www.mountvalor.com)), Sandra McCracken, Kelley McRae (love the new album!), and Josh Garrels. What can I say—it was a short writing process.

Last but not least, a huge thank you to my wonderful family for putting up with both me and all of these projects. You're the best, and I love you all more than words can ever express!

Brian Kannel

April 14, 2016

# *Long ago and far away...*

Squeezed into the pages of the Old Testament, between the books of history and the books known as the wisdom literature, is the fascinating story of Esther. While beautifully written and quite engaging, it's a story that doesn't seem to fit in the Bible. There isn't one mention of God throughout the book, no Messianic prophecies, and worship and prayer are strangely absent.

And yet, like a tree swaying in the midst of a storm, God's unseen presence is seen throughout the book. Esther, Mordecai, King Ahasuerus and the evil Haman all exist in the realm of the seen. God, however, remains unseen. Their lives, like ours, are played out in between both realms. While God can at times seem to be hidden from sight, His unseen presence is always more real than anything we can see with our eyes. In the story of Esther, we are invited to observe the God that can't be seen... and to trust His unseen guidance in our lives as well.



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