



ESTHER

FAITHFULNESS IN THE SILENCE



**small
groups**
LIFE TOGETHER

*“And who knows but that you
have come to your royal position
for such a time as this?”*

ESTHER 4:14

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LEADER'S NOTES FOR THESE STUDIES

These studies are written in a simple format with around 10 questions a week, including some background. They should take about an hour in a group of 8-12 people and are designed to be helpful for people across a broad range of ages and stages of life and across different cultures. If you desire some harder studies, we encourage you to read a commentary and write a few extra questions for your group. If you find them too difficult, cut a few questions out and write some simpler ones. Remember there are different levels of Biblical understanding in each group.

A few things will help you get the most out of these studies:

- **Prepare beforehand** – do the study on your own. If you don't, you will be OK, but if you do, you and others will probably benefit a lot more.
- **Read the Bible passages while you are together.** Some of them are very long, but this is God's word and reading it together is one of the most important parts of Bible study.
- Usually, the studies suggest you **read a bit, then answer questions, then read a bit more.** This is probably the most helpful way to use the studies. If you read all the passages at the start, it can be more difficult to remember all the details, especially in longer readings.
- Skip questions if you are running out of time. **But try not to skip the last question(s)** – they are usually the ones that tie the whole passage and the application to our lives together. Missing the last question is usually missing the most interesting discussions too!

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The book of Esther is one of the most intriguing and unusual books of the Bible. The events of a very strange story unfold in Susa, the capital of Persia. There is no mention of God or of his name Yahweh. The story tells of a time when the Jews were living in Persia and the King decides to banish his wife and find a new one. The Jewish girl Esther is chosen and so begins an incredulous series of events involving King **Xerxes**, his key official, **Haman**, the young girl **Esther**, and her relative and foster-father-figure, **Mordecai**.

The Book of Esther is a historical record of a difficult time in Israel's history around 470 BC. The Persian Empire reigned over much of the world, led by King Xerxes – from Egypt in the West to India in the East. God's people, Israel, were scattered throughout much of this empire, though mostly in the centre near the capital, Susa. The question for Israel at the time was: "Is God still our King?"

The story unfolds with deceptive plots and attempted genocide, but ends with the people of Judah taking bloody justice out against their enemies, with the killing of 75,000 of their enemies in one day. For many scholars studying this book, the events seem too improbable and unlikely. However, there is strong support for us to have confidence that this story is the record of truly historical, and quite amazing, events.

As you read the book of Esther, you may find yourself thinking that there are a lot of coincidences. Yet as we put this book into context with the whole of God's word, we find a much more reasonable explanation – that God is sovereign and although he is not mentioned by name in this book, he is certainly still sovereign over the events and future of his people. To dismiss these events as coincidence is unnecessary. Even when God's people are far from him, and facing the darkest times, God is still there. Even when they fail to mention Him, worship Him, or pay Him any attention, he is still there, and He has a plan for them that will not be stopped by any nation.

RECOMMENDED COMMENTARIES

Baldwin Joyce G. Esther (*Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*)
Inter Varsity Press. 1984. (This may now be out of print)

Peter Adam Esther: For such a time as this (Reading the Bible
today series) Aquila Press. 2019.

STUDY ONE

ESTHER 1:1-22, 2:1-20

PRAY FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER

Have you ever wondered if something that seemed to be a coincidence was actually God's deliberate work in your life?

Chapter 1 introduces us to the main players and the event that puts everything in motion. First, we are introduced to the King of Persia, Xerxes (also known in history as Ahasuerus), who reigns over 127 provinces from India to Cush. He is a powerful man, yet we are about to find out what sort of a leader he is.

Another key idea in this chapter is the tension for the Jews. As the people of Yahweh, the Lord, they have allegiance to Him alone. Yet in this empire, they also owe allegiance to the king, Xerxes.

Read Esther 1:1-22

1. What was the purpose of King Xerxes' banquet? What sort of event could this be compared to today?

"For the majority of people in western Asia, then as now, life was hard and food none too plentiful. While labourers received barely enough to live on, even though they were producing works of art that are still unsurpassed, life at court was extravagant beyond imagining. The more lavish the king's hospitality, the greater his claim to supremacy. Strangely to our ears, no protest was even hinted at." (Baldwin "Esther" page 55)

2. What picture does chapter 1 give us of the type of Kingdom Xerxes was ruling over?

3. How can we make sense of the incident with Queen Vashti? Why was she called on? Why did she not come? Why did the King decide to banish her? Was Vashti justified in refusing to come to the King?

4. Xerxes seeks the wisdom of his “experts” of the law. What is their response/suggestion and why?

5. The response of Xerxes is found in verse 22:

“He sent dispatches to all parts of the kingdom, to each province in its own script and to each people in their own language, proclaiming that every man should be ruler over his own household, using his native tongue.”

In what places might we see this sort of thinking in today’s world? Where does the Bible speak for or against this?

Read Esther 2:1-20

6. Verses 1-4 tell us that a process was to be established to determine a new queen. What was the plan and why?

7. In verses 5-7, what do we learn about Esther and her family?

8. Why did Mordecai instruct Esther to hide her nationality and family background (verse 10)? Is she being careful, or weak?

9. It is possible to think that Esther and Mordecai, at this stage, were just going along with an evil King and not speaking out as they should. At this point in time, what do you think of their character?

PRAY TOGETHER TO CLOSE

STUDY TWO

ESTHER 2:21-3:15

PRAY FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER

In 2024, the 45 most dangerous countries to be a Christian are: North Korea, Libya, Eritrea, Yemen, Nigeria... (report by "Open Doors" <https://www.opendoors.org.au/world-watch-list/>)

In Bangladesh, Gonesh is a man who came to faith in Christ, and started sharing the gospel with the people in his village. Some villagers of a different faith threatened him with violence if he continued. He continued to share the gospel and was attacked until he suffered injuries to his limbs and face and was rushed to emergency care. He lives in a state of fear and panic. (<https://www.opendoors.org.au/frontline-faith/bangladesh-beaten-for-sharing-the-gospel/>)

What is your response to Christian persecution in the world today?

Read Esther 2:21-3:6

The incident with Mordecai at the gate will become significant soon. The actions of Haman will become significant even sooner.

1. In 2:21-23, why would Mordecai not ignore this conversation and allow the King to be assassinated? This could have been the end of Xerxes!

Read Deuteronomy 25:17-19 to hear the history of the people called the Amalekites...The Amalekites did not fear God and so they attacked Israel. Therefore Israel was told to attack and destroy the Amalekites when they had the opportunity.

Now read 1 Samuel 15:7-9

Saul was told to destroy the Amalekites completely, yet he did not, and even spares the King, Agag (verse 9). As we now return to Esther, here we are with the big problem: Haman, an Agagite – a descendant of Agag. Haman is now up against Mordecai, a descendant of Saul, who refused to bow down to Haman, the Agagite.

2. Why do you think Mordecai would not bow down to him, given the history here? (Compare here also the story of Daniel not bowing down to the King.)

3. Given verse 6, it is important to understand this history as it gives rise to Haman's attempt to destroy all of the Jews. Why do you think a person would consider such harsh retaliation against a whole people group?

4. Obviously, there are other times in history when others have attempted to wipe out an entire people. How can, or should, a Christian approach or engage with the issue of genocide today? Is this still a relevant issue?

Read Esther 3:7-15

5. How does Haman secure the King's permission to wipe out the Jews? What reasoning does he use?

6. As we read these unfolding events, we can possibly understand verse 15 – that the city of Susa was bewildered. If we put aside Haman for a moment, how does this whole episode reflect on the Kingship of Xerxes?

7. Chapter 1 begins the story in the third year of Xerxes reign (1:3). Chapter 3 brings us to the twelfth year of his reign (3:7). What do you think was happening with Esther during the middle 9 years?

8. Let's turn to Jesus now. Compare him to Xerxes. How does Jesus' rule differ from Xerxes' rule?

9. Compare Esther 3:13-14 to Matthew 2:13-16. What role do you think Satan plays in these plots by human kings to kill the people of God?

PRAY TOGETHER TO CLOSE

STUDY THREE

ESTHER 4:1-17, 5:1-14

PRAY FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER

If you had the choice of knowing what would happen to you in the next 12 months, would you want to know? Why or why not?

Now the edict has been sent out for the destruction of the Jewish people, and the day had been set, a cloud is over all of the Jewish people in the land. Putting on sackcloth and ashes was a custom observed for mourning (and terror) by many different cultures of the time, including the Persians. We also know of this happening, for example, when Jonah went to Nineveh and warned them to repent.

It is a time of national mourning for the Jews. Yet, even though they mourn, we still see no sign or recognition of Yahweh, the LORD. Are God's people so far from him that even under such tragedy, they fail to turn to him? However, while His people may be far from Him, God is not far from His people. He is still sovereign. The events we see unfold are certainly not just coincidences.

Read Esther 4:1-17

1. What is the immediate response to the edict from Mordecai? What about the rest of the Jews?

2. What does Esther do when she finds out about Mordecai's mourning?

3. Remember that the King does not know that he has technically signed a death warrant for Esther, his Queen, as he did not know she is a Jew or that the Jews are the people Haman hated (3:8). So what is Esther's problem in simply approaching the King about this matter?

4. In verses 12-14,

a. Is Mordecai challenging Esther's courage? Or is he encouraging her?

b. What does Mordecai mean when he says "For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place"?

5. Do you think Esther's response (verse 15) shows courage, faith in God, or just family loyalty?

Read Esther 5:1-14

After the banquets by Xerxes (chapters 1 and 2), we now have two banquets given by Queen Esther.

6. What were the purposes of

a. Xerxes' banquets? (1:3-5 and 2:18)

b. Esther's banquets? (5:5 and 5:8)

7. What risk did Esther run in approaching the King, and why did she do it?

8. The rage of Haman against Mordecai is fuelled again (5:9) and after talking with his family, they encourage Haman to build a pole (or a gallows in some translations) set up to impale (hang) Mordecai. It is a huge 23 metres high! Where does Haman's rage and desire for vengeance come from?

9. The use of a "pole" to kill someone is reminiscent of the cross of Jesus, also sometimes referred to as a "pole". (see Galatians 3:13, where 'tree' also translates as 'pole'). How easy is it for us to desire vengeance? How did Jesus respond to his attackers in the gospels when they plotted to hang him on a pole/tree?

PRAY TOGETHER TO CLOSE

STUDY FOUR

ESTHER 6:1-14

PRAY FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER

Opening discussion:

Have you ever looked back a few years and remembered a time when someone really helped you, but at the time, perhaps you didn't realise how significant it was?

Read Esther 6:1-14

1. Do you think it is just a pretty good coincidence that Xerxes could not sleep, decided to read the chronicles of his reign, and suddenly remembered Mordecai? Can we be sure this is perhaps not just a coincidence?

2. Haman is caught up in his own self-aggrandizement. He thinks only of himself and his own glory. He thinks that he is the only one who is deserving of the King's praise, and this thinking backfires. How does Haman's desire for glory compare with Jesus?

3. King Xerxes can come across as a little flakey in the Book of Esther. He has given Haman permission to kill a whole race of people, yet in chapter 3 (see verse 11), it is clear that he still does not know that the Jews are actually the source of Haman's hatred. So, Xerxes has firstly unknowingly allowed for the killing of all Jews and has now decided to honour Mordecai, a Jew. What sort of a ruler would you say Xerxes is? How does he compare to today's world rulers/leaders?

4. How does Xerxes compare to the Lord God as King?

5. Do you think Haman's family and advisors have come to the right conclusion in verses 12-14? What options did Haman have now?

Read Psalm 75.

6. What does this Psalm teach us about the Lord God – his ways and his power?

7. In Psalm 75, the horn is a symbol of strength and honour, yet when used in arrogance or defiance, God cuts it down. Who is lifting up their horn in the Book of Esther so far? Who is the most arrogant or defiant?

8. What does Esther 6 teach us about those seeking honour in this world?

9. Without mention of God, how is the book of Esther pointing us to God so far?

10. In what ways can we be the arrogant ones before God in our lives today?

PRAY TOGETHER TO CLOSE

STUDY FIVE

ESTHER 7:1-10, ESTHER 8:1-14

PRAY FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER

Opening discussion:

If you could change one law in our country, what would it be?

As we read these chapters, the tables are turned and Haman is finally dealt with. Sadly, justice often brings consequences that are not very palatable. Although we must consider the culture of the day, retributive justice is often not very nice or peaceful.

Read Esther 7:1-10

1. When you read chapter 7, are you excited or saddened by the outcome for Haman? Why?

2. What is the point of the note in verse 8? Was this misinterpretation of Haman “molesting” the Queen even necessary?

3. Why are so many Eunuchs involved in the King’s court? And what does this tell us of the royal court of the time?

Read Esther 8:1-14

The King's edicts, under the law of the Medes and Persians, cannot be revoked. This was their custom. (See also Daniel 6:8 for another example). So it was not possible for the King to revoke the law set by Haman to destroy the Jews. Therefore, the King allows Esther and Mordecai (verse 8) to write any decree they liked to solve the problem.

4. Is the King lazy or generous in allowing them to do this?

5. Why would the King simply not stop the law that Haman passed to kill all the Jews?

6. Can you think of another law Esther and Mordecai could have written that would have solved the problem without bloodshed and without revoking Haman's law?

7. What are the most important commandments/laws of God? How do they compare with Xerxes' laws?

8. How secure are human laws? How often does the legal system fail us, and in what ways?

9. It can be difficult for Christians to serve in a pagan government or legal system. Even though there are many Christian principles in our Australian legal system, what can be the struggles today for Christians serving in politics or law, and how can we support our brothers and sisters serving in these areas each day?

10. What is God's punishment for sin against him? Is this fair?

PRAY TOGETHER TO CLOSE

STUDY SIX

ESTHER 8:15-10:3

PRAY FOR YOUR TIME TOGETHER

Opening discussion:

When is bloodshed acceptable?

As we conclude the book of Esther, there is a great victory but also a deep sadness at the bloodshed. As we know, God's people are not always godly, and with no mention of God by name in this book, it can be difficult to work out if what the Jews did was right or just vengeful. When is bloodshed justifiable?

Read Esther 8:15-9:19

The fear of the Jews gripped the whole land and they were successful in every battle. Mordecai became very powerful.

1. Read 9:5 again. What do you think of this attitude of the Jews? Is this justified as a means of self-preservation?

The King again offers Esther anything she asks for and she replies in verse 13: "If it pleases the king," Esther answered, "give the Jews in Susa permission to carry out this day's edict tomorrow also, and let Haman's ten sons be impaled on poles."

2. Why would Esther request such retribution? Is this justified?

3. The Jews in other provinces killed 75,000 of their enemies. What is the purpose in 9:16 (and in other verses) of recording that they did not take any plunder?

Read Esther 9:20-10:3

Purim, in verses 20-22, is recorded as a 2-day feast celebrated as a reminder of the month when the Jews got relief from their enemies. It was nearly a year since the lot was cast (3:7) for the date of the month of Adar to kill all the Jews. During this time, the Jews lived in fear of being annihilated.

On the violence of chapter 9:

“Scripture does not commend the violence used by the Jews in ancient Persia. Later, a Jewish teacher would say: “All who take the sword will perish by the sword” (Matt 26:52). Many avoid the problem of chapter 9 by saying that the event in Esther never happened. But such acts do happen – witness the horrors of the Crusades of the terror of the Holocaust – thought they should not. Vengeance is a divine prerogative, and belongs to the Lord alone (Deut. 32:35; Rom, 12:19; Heb. 10:30)” Lasor, Hubbard and Bush Old Testament Survey (second edition, Eerdmans 1996). Page 541.

4. Was this bloodshed and celebration in remembrance of their relief justifiable? If not, how else could they have gained their freedom from certain death?

5. In chapter 9, why does Mordecai go to such lengths to record and establish Purim as an annual celebration?

6. In 10:3, Mordecai is recorded as “second in rank to King Xerxes”. In what other times in Biblical history has one of God’s people, like Mordecai, been given the position of the second most powerful person in the kingdom (and possibly the world)? Why do you think this happens?

7. In Luke 13:29, Jesus says: “People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God.” What will we be celebrating at the feast in the kingdom of God/heaven?

8. How do these verses remind us that the cost of sin is bloodshed?

- Matthew 26:28 – “for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”
- Hebrews 9:22 – “Indeed, under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins.”
- 1 Peter 2:24 – “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.”

9. Where is God in the book of Esther?

PRAY TOGETHER TO CLOSE

