

The Book of Esther, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: The King's Feast and Vashti Deposed

Esther 1:1-22

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

Doctrinally, this lesson establishes the central nerve of the entire book: the providence of God. Esther never names God, yet His hand directs every turn of events. The teacher must help students see that providence is not coincidence and not fate, but the wise and faithful working of the living God who governs history, often invisibly, to accomplish His purposes. The deposing of Vashti looks like nothing more than a royal tantrum, but it is the first quiet move in a sequence that will place a Jewish girl on the throne in time to save her people. Students need to leave understanding that the silence of God's name is not the absence of God's hand.

Alongside providence, the chapter exposes the emptiness of human pride and excess. Ahasuerus has everything the world prizes, an empire, wealth beyond measure, absolute power, and yet he cannot command the heart of his own wife. His six-month display of glory collapses into a humiliated rage on the seventh day of a drunken feast. The lesson aims to let that contrast do its work, holding up worldly grandeur against its own hollowness, without ever holding up the king's drunken, impulsive conduct as anything to imitate.

Most of all, this lesson aims at the spiritual formation of the student. The goal is not merely to inform students about the Persian court, but to form people who trust the unseen God in their own unseen circumstances, who refuse to build their lives on being admired, who honor the God-given dignity of every person, and who lead and love without manipulation. The teacher should keep pressing the ancient text into present hearts, so that students walk away not just knowing what happened in Susa, but living differently in their own homes and workplaces because they believe God is at work there too.

Question 1

Student Question:

The book of Esther never mentions God by name, yet it is included in Scripture as inspired and profitable. What does this teach us about how God works in the world and why we can trust His providence even when His hand is unseen?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The most famous feature of Esther is what it lacks. In ten chapters of palace drama, the name of God never appears, nor does any explicit prayer, miracle, or word from a prophet. Some in history have stumbled over this, but the church has rightly received Esther as inspired Scripture,

profitable for instruction (2 Timothy 3:16). The absence of God's name is not a flaw; it is the point. The book teaches providence precisely by withholding the obvious.

Providence is the doctrine that God upholds and governs all things to accomplish His good purposes. Unlike the dramatic interventions of the Exodus or the fire on Carmel, providence usually works quietly, through ordinary events, timing, and human choices, so that only afterward do we trace the pattern of His hand. Esther is the inspired demonstration of this kind of working. The teacher can point to Romans 8:28, that God works all things together for good for those who love Him, and to Proverbs 21:1, that the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord.

This matters enormously for ordinary Christians. Most believers will never see a sea split or hear a voice from heaven. We live in a world that looks like Esther's: a place where God's name is rarely spoken and events seem to be driven by human ambition and accident. The book trains us to trust that the same God who guided events in Susa is guiding events in our towns, even when we cannot see Him. We walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7).

Be careful to distinguish providence from fatalism. God's hidden working does not erase human responsibility; the people in Esther make real choices for which they are accountable, and so do we. Providence assures us that God is sovereign over the outcome without making God the author of human sin. Ahasuerus and his court act wickedly and foolishly, and God overrules even that for His redemptive ends.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The inspiration and authority of all Scripture, including books where God seems hidden (2 Timothy 3:16; Romans 15:4)
- The doctrine of providence: God's quiet governance of history toward His purposes
- The difference between providence and coincidence, and between providence and fatalism
- Walking by faith and not by sight when God's hand is unseen

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between saying something was a coincidence and saying it was providence? How would each shape the way you live?
- Can you point to a season in your own life where God's hand was invisible at the time but clear in hindsight?
- If God's name is never written in Esther, how do we know He is present at all? What clues does the book itself give?

Question 2

Student Question:

Ahasuerus poured six months and the wealth of an empire into being admired. Where do you spend your time, money, or energy trying to be admired, and what would change if you measured those things differently?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The scale of Ahasuerus's feast is staggering: a hundred and eighty days of displaying the riches of his glorious kingdom, followed by a seven-day feast for everyone in the citadel. This is not generosity; it is a campaign of self-glorification. The king is using his wealth and power to be admired by the world he rules.

The hunger to be seen and admired is one of the oldest temptations of the human heart, and it wears modern clothes. We may not own an empire, but we curate our images, our homes, our resumes, and our social media feeds, often spending real time and money on the impression we leave rather than the person we are becoming. Jesus warned against doing righteous acts to be seen by others (Matthew 6:1), and the apostle John named the pride of life as one of the world's defining lusts (1 John 2:16).

The deep irony of the chapter is that all this display of glory ends in humiliation. The man who spent six months being admired cannot, in the end, command the one person closest to him. The pursuit of admiration is a bottomless cup; it never satisfies and it always exposes us. Better to seek the praise that comes from God (John 12:43) than the applause of a room that will forget you by morning.

The teacher should press gently here. The question is not whether students own palaces, but where their energy quietly flows toward being seen. Naming that hunger honestly is the first step toward laying it down.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The vanity of seeking human admiration and the hollowness of worldly glory
- Stewardship: what our spending of time, money, and energy reveals about our hearts
- Jesus' warning against practicing righteousness to be seen (Matthew 6:1)
- Seeking the praise of God over the praise of people (John 12:43)

Discussion Prompts

- Where does your energy quietly flow toward being seen and admired? Be specific.
- What is the difference between healthy ambition and the hunger to be praised?
- If you measured a week by what honored God rather than what impressed people, what would change?

Question 3

Student Question:

The feast was marked by limitless drinking, with the king's heart merry with wine when he made his fateful command. What does Scripture teach about the way excess and drunkenness cloud judgment and dishonor God, and how is this displayed in the king's conduct?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The text is candid that the feast was awash in wine, with the royal command that drinking be without restraint, and that the king acted when his heart was merry with wine. The crucial decision of the chapter is made by a man whose judgment is impaired. Scripture is clear-eyed about this. Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and whoever is deceived by them is not wise (Proverbs 20:1).

The Bible never treats drunkenness as harmless fun. It clouds judgment, loosens self-control, and leads people to do what they would not do sober. Noah was shamed by it, Lot was deceived by it, and the New Testament lists drunkenness among the works of the flesh that exclude people from the kingdom (Galatians 5:19–21), commanding instead, be not drunk with wine, but be filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

Notice how the king's conduct is reported, not endorsed. Scripture often records sin plainly without approving it. We are meant to see in Ahasuerus a warning, not a model: a powerful man whose impulsiveness, fueled by drink and pride, sets in motion a decree he cannot recall. The teacher should help students see the wreckage that follows a clouded mind making weighty decisions.

The broader principle reaches past alcohol. Any appetite that dethrones a sober, self-controlled mind, whether drink, anger, lust, or exhaustion, makes us dangerous to ourselves and others. God calls His people to be sober and vigilant (1 Peter 5:8), guarding the clarity that wise decisions require.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The biblical warning against drunkenness and loss of self-control (Proverbs 20:1; Ephesians 5:18)
- Drunkenness listed among the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19–21)
- Scripture reporting sin without endorsing it; the king as warning, not model
- The call to sobriety and vigilance of mind (1 Peter 5:8)

Discussion Prompts

- How does a clouded mind, whether from drink or other appetites, lead to decisions we later regret?
- Why do you think Scripture records the king's drunken folly so plainly rather than softening it?
- What does it mean practically to be sober and vigilant in a culture that prizes excess?

Question 4

Student Question:

When have you made a decision under the influence of strong emotion, fatigue, or appetite that you later regretted, and what guardrails could help you avoid acting from a clouded heart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Ahasuerus made his command in a moment of merry, wine-fueled impulse, and the empire lived with the consequences. We are all more like him than we want to admit. Strong emotion, fatigue, hunger, hurt pride, and appetite can all hijack our judgment and push us into words and choices we cannot take back.

Scripture commends the slow, deliberate heart. He that is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he that rules his spirit than he that takes a city (Proverbs 16:32). Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath (James 1:19). Wisdom often looks like simply not deciding in the heat of the moment.

Practical guardrails matter. Many wise believers refuse to make major decisions when angry, exhausted, or pressured, choosing to sleep on it, to seek counsel (Proverbs 15:22), and to pray before acting. The king had advisers, but he consulted them only to ratify his rage, not to restrain it. Counsel is only as good as our willingness to be slowed by it.

This question is meant to be personal and humbling. Everyone in the room has a story of a clouded decision. The aim is not shame but wisdom: to build into our lives the pauses that keep a merry or angry heart from making decrees we will regret.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The danger of decisions driven by emotion, fatigue, or appetite
- The biblical virtue of self-control and being slow to anger (Proverbs 16:32; James 1:19)
- The value of godly counsel and willingness to be restrained by it (Proverbs 15:22)
- Building practical guardrails against impulsive, irreversible choices

Discussion Prompts

- Tell of a time you decided in the heat of the moment and wished you had waited. What did it cost?
- What practical guardrails could keep you from acting out of a clouded heart?
- Why is it so hard to accept counsel that slows us down when we are determined to act?

Question 5

Student Question:

Vashti was created in God's image with dignity that the throne room seemed to forget. What does the Bible teach about the worth and dignity of every person, including women, and how does that truth confront the way she was treated?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When the king commanded Vashti to be brought to display her beauty before the gathered men, he was treating a person as an ornament, a possession to be shown off alongside his gold and linen. The throne room had forgotten what God never forgets: that she was a human being made in His image, with a dignity no crown could grant and no decree could erase.

From the opening of the Bible, every person bears the image of God, created male and female (Genesis 1:27). This is the foundation of human dignity and worth. It applies to kings and queens, servants and strangers, men and women alike. James warns that with the same tongue we bless God and curse people who are made in the similitude of God (James 3:9), a contradiction the gospel will not allow.

The teacher should handle Vashti with care and not flatten her into a simple lesson. The text deliberately leaves her reasons unstated, inviting reflection rather than easy verdicts. What is clear is that a woman with dignity was treated as a spectacle by a court ruled by wine and ego, and the text exposes the folly of that court more than it condemns her.

This dignity is not earned by beauty, usefulness, or status; it is conferred by the Creator. That truth confronts every system, ancient or modern, that values people for what they provide rather than for who they are. To honor God is to honor the people He has made.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The image of God as the foundation of human dignity for every person (Genesis 1:27)
- The sin of treating persons as objects, possessions, or spectacles
- The dignity and worth of women as image-bearers equal in value before God
- The inconsistency of honoring God while dishonoring those made in His image (James 3:9)

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that human dignity is conferred by God rather than earned by beauty, status, or usefulness?
- How does the throne room's treatment of Vashti expose the values of a court ruled by wine and ego?
- Where do you see people treated as ornaments or tools rather than image-bearers today?

Question 6

Student Question:

Think of someone you are tempted to treat as merely useful to you rather than as a person made in God's image. What is one concrete way you could honor their dignity this week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

It is easy to condemn a Persian king for treating a person as useful, and far harder to see the same instinct in ourselves. We can subtly reduce people to their function: the coworker who is only a means to a goal, the clerk who is only an obstacle, the family member who is only a help or a hindrance to what we want.

Jesus reversed this entirely. He stopped for the one, noticed the overlooked, dignified the woman at the well, the tax collector in the tree, the children the disciples shooed away. He taught that love of neighbor is second only to love of God (Matthew 22:39), and that whatever we do to the least, we do to Him (Matthew 25:40).

Honoring dignity is rarely abstract; it is concrete and small. It looks like learning a name, making eye contact, listening without rushing, speaking to someone rather than past them, refusing to talk about a person as though they were a problem. The question asks for one specific person and one specific action precisely because love becomes real in particulars.

Encourage students to leave with an actual name in mind and an actual step to take. The transformation this lesson seeks is not warmer feelings but changed treatment of a real person this week.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The temptation to reduce people to their usefulness to us
- Jesus' pattern of dignifying the overlooked and the marginalized
- Love of neighbor as central to the law and to Christlikeness (Matthew 22:39)
- Honoring dignity through concrete, particular acts rather than vague good intentions

Discussion Prompts

- Who is one person you tend to treat as useful rather than as a person? Name them silently.
- What is one concrete way you could honor that person's dignity this week?
- Why is it easier to affirm human dignity in theory than to practice it with difficult people?

Question 7

Student Question:

The king's advisers feared that one woman's refusal would unravel order in every home in the empire, and they responded with a sweeping decree. What does this reveal about the difference between control imposed by power and the godly order God designs for marriage and the home?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

When Vashti refused, the king's adviser Memucan responded with alarm, warning that her example would embolden wives throughout the empire to despise their husbands, and proposed a sweeping royal decree that every man should bear rule in his own house. The reaction is revealing: the court tried to secure order in the home through imperial force and fear.

The Bible does teach a God-designed order for marriage and the home, but it looks nothing like a decree extracted from a drunken throne room. God's pattern for marriage is the lifelong, one-flesh union of one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24; Matthew 19:4-6), and the New Testament calls husbands not to dominate but to love their wives as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Ephesians 5:25). Godly order is built on sacrificial love and mutual honor, not on threat.

Control imposed by power is fragile and produces resentment; godly order rooted in love produces trust and flourishing. The court's panic shows that an empire ruled by fear is always anxious about losing control, while a home ruled by Christlike love rests in something stronger than any decree.

The teacher should be careful not to read the king's decree as a biblical model for marriage. It is a pagan court's anxious power-grab, recorded as part of the story, not commended as the will of God. The contrast itself teaches us: God's design dignifies, while raw power demeans.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The difference between control imposed by power and God's design for the home
- God's pattern for marriage as the lifelong, one-flesh union of one man and one woman (Genesis 2:24)
- Husbands called to sacrificial, Christlike love rather than domination (Ephesians 5:25)
- The fragility of fear-based control versus the strength of love-based order
- Reading the decree as part of the narrative, not as a model to imitate

Discussion Prompts

- What is the difference between order that is imposed by power and order that grows from love?
- How does Christ's love for the church reshape what leadership in a home should look like?
- Why does control rooted in fear tend to produce resentment rather than the loyalty it seeks?

Question 8

Student Question:

Where are you tempted to use control, pressure, or fear to get the response you want from people, especially those closest to you, and what does godly leadership look like instead?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

The king's court reached for pressure and decree to get the response it wanted. We are tempted by gentler-looking versions of the same thing: guilt trips, the silent treatment, veiled threats, withdrawing affection, or wielding our position to force compliance, especially with the people we are closest to.

Manipulation and intimidation may produce outward compliance, but they corrode relationships and grieve the Spirit. Paul describes love as patient and kind, not seeking its own way, not easily provoked (1 Corinthians 13:4-5). Coercion is the opposite of love; it treats people as means to our ends rather than as souls to be cherished.

Godly influence works differently. It persuades rather than pressures, serves rather than dominates, and is willing to absorb cost for the good of the other, as Christ did. Even God Himself, who has all power, woos rather than coerces the human heart, calling, come now, and let us reason together (Isaiah 1:18).

This question invites honest self-examination about the closest relationships, where our worst tactics often hide. The aim is to trade the tools of control for the patient, costly work of love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The subtle forms of control: guilt, threats, withdrawal, and intimidation
- Love as the opposite of coercion (1 Corinthians 13:4-5)
- Godly influence through persuasion and service rather than pressure
- God's own pattern of wooing rather than coercing the human heart (Isaiah 1:18)

Discussion Prompts

- What tactics do you reach for when you want to control someone's response? Be honest.
- Why do we so often use our worst relational tactics on the people closest to us?
- What would it look like to trade control for patient, costly love this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Esther opens with a flawed pagan king, drunken feasting, and an impulsive decree, and yet this is the very stage on which God will set Esther in place to save His people. What does this opening chapter teach us about how God's sovereign providence works through flawed people and broken circumstances to accomplish His purposes, and how does this point us toward the God who later worked through a Roman cross to redeem the world?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Step back and see the whole stage. The book opens with a flawed pagan king, a drunken six-month feast, an impulsive command, a wounded ego, and a hasty decree. There is nothing holy in this room. And yet this is precisely the stage on which God will set Esther in place. The deposing of Vashti is the first quiet move in a sequence that will lead to a Jewish orphan becoming queen in time to save her people from annihilation. No one in that throne room could see it, but God was already at work.

This is the heart of the doctrine of providence. God does not require holy actors or favorable circumstances to accomplish His purposes. He works through flawed people and broken situations, even through human sin, without ever being the author of that sin, bending it toward His redemptive ends. As Joseph said to his brothers, ye thought evil against me, but God meant it unto good (Genesis 50:20). The king meant a vain display; God meant a throne for Esther.

The teacher should help students hold two truths together. First, the people in Esther are fully responsible for their choices; God's sovereignty does not cancel human accountability. Second, God's purposes cannot be thwarted by human folly; the very mess of the Persian court becomes the means of deliverance. This is not fatalism and not mere coincidence, but the faithful governance of a God who keeps His covenant promises.

And this opening points us forward. The pattern of God working salvation through what looks like defeat reaches its fullest expression at the cross. Wicked hands crucified the Lord of glory, yet that very act, the worst evil in human history, was the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God for our redemption (Acts 2:23). The God who began to save His people through a vain king's banquet is the same God who saved the world through a Roman execution. If He can work through Susa, He can work through a cross, and He can work through the unseen circumstances of your life.

This is the lesson's doctrinal summit. The students should leave convinced that the God of Esther reigns over every flawed and broken setting they face, and that His hidden hand has always been bending history toward redemption, finished in Christ.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's sovereign providence working through flawed people and broken circumstances
- The harmony of God's sovereignty and human accountability (Genesis 50:20)
- God overruling human sin for redemptive good without being its author
- The cross as the supreme example of God working salvation through apparent defeat (Acts 2:23)
- The unity of God's redemptive work from the Old Covenant to its fulfillment in Christ

Discussion Prompts

- How can the same God be sovereign over events while people remain fully responsible for their choices?

- How does the opening of Esther prepare us to understand God working salvation through the cross?
- Where in your life right now does the setting look too flawed or broken for God to use? What would it mean to trust His hidden hand there?

Question 10

Student Question:

Looking back over the whole of Esther 1, name one specific way the Lord is using this passage to form you, whether in your handling of pride, your treatment of others, your trust in His unseen hand, or your willingness to honor Him where His name is never spoken.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to gather the whole chapter into a single, personal response. Esther 1 has set before us the vanity of pride and display, the wreckage of clouded judgment, the dignity of every image-bearer, the difference between control and godly love, and above all the unseen hand of God at work in a setting where His name is never spoken.

The aim of the lesson has never been merely to understand the Persian court, but to be formed by the God who governed it. Scripture was written for our learning (Romans 15:4), so that we might be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2). The text is meant to do something in us, not just teach us something about history.

Encourage students to be specific. Vague resolutions evaporate; concrete ones take root. One may need to lay down a hunger to be admired. Another may need to honor a person they have been treating as useful. Another may need to trust God's unseen hand in a circumstance that feels like chance and chaos. The Lord meets us in the particulars.

Close by lifting their eyes to Christ. The same God who quietly moved through Susa to save His people is the God who openly gave His Son to save the world, and who is at work in each believer to conform us to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29). The forming work of this lesson is part of that larger work, and it is good.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Scripture's purpose to form and transform, not merely inform (Romans 15:4; Romans 12:2)
- The value of specific, concrete response over vague resolution
- Christ's ongoing work of conforming believers to His image (Romans 8:29)
- Trusting God's unseen providence in one's own present circumstances

Discussion Prompts

- Of everything in Esther 1, what is the one truth the Lord is pressing on you most?
- Name one specific, concrete way you will live differently this week because of this passage.

- How does seeing God's hidden hand in Susa change the way you will face your own unseen circumstances?