

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Esther: For Such a Time as This

Lesson at a glance

Esther is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God by name, yet every page is about Him. The lesson walks through the whole book in five movements: the deposing of Vashti and the elevating of Esther, Haman's plot, Mordecai's challenge and Esther's resolve, the two banquets and chapter 6, and the deliverance and the feast of Purim. The lesson then introduces the doctrine of providence directly, and asks each woman where she has been placed "for such a time as this."

Goals for this session

First, that each woman would see the doctrine of providence in living color, and would learn to look for God's hand in the ordinary details of her own life.

Second, that each woman would consider the positions and relationships God has placed her in, and ask what kingdom purpose He may be working through them.

Third, that the group would be encouraged to act with courage when the moment calls for it, even when the cost is high.

Fourth, that the group would learn the value of rhythms of remembrance, especially the weekly Lord's Supper, as God's appointed way of helping His people remember.

Preparing to lead

Read the whole book of Esther in one sitting earlier in the week. It is short and dramatic. Then go back through it slowly with the questions in hand.

Read Romans 8:28 to 39, Proverbs 16:33, and Proverbs 21:1 in preparation. The doctrine of providence is the theological spine of the lesson, and these passages will help you teach it cleanly.

Pray for each woman by name. Ask the Lord to show you which woman in the group He has placed where, "for such a time as this," and pray for her courage.

Sensitive topics in this lesson

Feeling far from God (questions 6, 13). The book of Esther is set among Jews who did not return to Jerusalem when they had the chance. They were comfortable in Persia, drifting from the temple. Some

women in your group may identify with the sense of being far from God right now. The good news of Esther is that He is not far from them, even when His name is unmentioned.

Being asked to risk reputation, comfort, or relationships (question 7). Most of the women in the room will not be asked to risk their lives the way Esther was, but many are being asked to risk other things: a friendship, a job, approval, the family peace. Mordecai's words push gently but firmly.

Past compromises (question 3). Esther's early conduct (the beauty contest, hiding her ethnicity, living in a pagan palace) was not exemplary by any standard. God still used her. Some women in the room have not started strong either. Let the lesson encourage them.

Suggested 60- to 75-minute schedule

Five minutes: welcome.

Five minutes: open in prayer. Read Esther 4:13 to 16 aloud, Mordecai's challenge and Esther's resolve.

Five minutes: warm-up. Ask each woman to share a "coincidence" in her own life that, looking back, she now believes was the hand of God.

Thirty-five to forty minutes: discussion. Choose six or seven questions in advance.

Five to ten minutes: "Your response" reflection.

Five minutes: closing prayer.

Discussion priorities

Make sure these are among the questions you discuss: 7 (Mordecai's challenge and Esther's risk), 9 (chapter 6 and providence), 13 (the hidden God), and 14 (for such a time as this).

Notes on key questions

Question 2. Ahasuerus (Xerxes) is a portrait of power without self-control. The deposing of Vashti tells us what kind of kingdom Esther is about to enter. Some women in your group know what it is to be in proximity to that kind of power. Be alert.

Question 4. The incident in 2:21 to 23 looks like a side story, but it is the setup for chapter 6. The author records it because he wants us to see, in retrospect, that God was preparing the rescue years before it was needed.

Question 5. Haman as "the Agagite" is no small detail. The hatred between Amalek and Israel goes back to Exodus 17 and 1 Samuel 15. Saul's partial obedience left a thread that is still unraveling centuries later. Partial obedience is long-lasting in its damage. The point is sobering and worth surfacing.

Question 7. "For such a time as this" is one of the most quoted lines in the Bible. Make sure the women feel its weight in context. Mordecai is not flattering Esther; he is telling her that God's deliverance is not dependent on her, but that the privilege of being God's instrument is on the table. The same is true for each of us.

Question 9. Chapter 6 is the great pivot of the book. List the coincidences with the group: the king cannot sleep, he asks for the chronicles, the reader opens to the right page, Haman happens to be in the courtyard, the king asks Haman what should be done for a man the king wishes to honor, and Haman thinks he is the man. None of this is accident. Connect it explicitly to Proverbs 16:33; 21:1; Romans 8:28.

Question 12. The feast of Purim is a Jewish memorial of God's deliverance, still celebrated today. Under the new covenant, the Lord has given His church one weekly memorial, the Lord's Supper, observed on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23 to 26). Make sure the women see the connection: God's people have always been a remembering people, and the rhythm He has given us now is weekly and centered on Christ.

Question 13. Most of our lives are lived in the kind of book Esther is. God is rarely seen but everywhere acting. Help the women see that Esther was given to the canon precisely for the seasons when God seems silent. He is not silent. He is hidden, working everything together for His purposes and the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Question 14. Each woman in the room has been placed where she is by God. The Optional Application is worth doing in the hour if you have time: a short list of positions and relationships, and beside each the question, "Why might God have put me here?" This is not abstract. It is intended to lead to action.

About the Study Skill in this lesson

One major Study Skill appears in Lesson 8, Recognizing the Doctrine of Providence. This is a doctrine that shapes how Christians read the rest of their lives. Take a moment in the group to read the skill aloud, along with the passages it cites (Proverbs 16:33; 21:1; Romans 8:28). The women will leave the group with new eyes for the silent moments of their own weeks.

A suggested closing prayer

Pray your own prayer. A sample, if you would like one:

"Father, we thank You for the book of Esther, where Your name is unmentioned and Your hand is everywhere. Thank You for the providence that placed Esther in the palace, that gave the king a sleepless night, that turned the gallows back on Haman. Thank You for the providence that has placed each woman here, in this congregation, in this season of her life, for such a time as this. Give us the courage of Esther for whatever You are calling us to this week, and the trust to leave the outcome to You. In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, who Himself walked the long corridor toward the throne, knowing what it would cost. Amen."

Looking ahead to Lesson 9

Next week begins our four New Testament lessons, with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4. Encourage the women to read the chapter in one sitting and to read John 3 right before it. John pairs the two scenes on purpose, and the contrast between Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman is worth sitting with.