

Lesson Eight

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Esther: For Such a Time as This

The book of Esther is the only book in the Bible that never mentions God by name. Not once. No prayers are recorded. No miracles are performed. No prophet shows up to speak in the LORD's name. And yet from beginning to end, the book is about nothing but the activity of God. He is in every coincidence, every sleepless night, every banquet, every gallows, every cast of the dice. He is so completely behind the curtain that you only see Him when you stop looking for the obvious and start watching for the pattern.

Esther herself is a Jewish orphan living in exile in Persia, raised by a cousin, and ultimately swept into a beauty contest by a king with whom no Jewish father would have wanted his daughter. She is not particularly devout in the early chapters. She hides her ethnicity. She lives in a pagan palace and does, on the surface, what she is told. And then a moment comes when everything she is and everything she is willing to risk converges in a single decision, and she walks down a long corridor toward a throne not knowing whether she will return alive.

Read the entire book of Esther this week. It is only ten chapters, and it reads like a novel. As you read, watch for the fingerprints of the unmentioned God. Ask yourself the question Mordecai will eventually ask Esther, and that he, in some sense, is asking each of us. Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

First impressions

The events of Esther take place during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 486 to 465 B.C.), between the first return of the Jewish exiles under Zerubbabel (recorded in Ezra 1 to 6) and the second return under Ezra (Ezra 7 onward). The Jews in Esther are those who did not return to Jerusalem when they had the chance. They had grown comfortable in Persia, far from the temple and the land of promise. God's pursuit of them in the book of Esther shows that He had not abandoned them, even when they had quietly drifted away from Him.

1.
 - a. Read the book of Esther in one sitting (about 35 to 40 minutes). After your first reading, what is your overall impression?
 - b. How is the book different from what you might have expected of a Bible book?

- c. What surprised you?

A queen deposed, an orphan elevated (1:1–2:18)

- 2.
 - a. Read chapter 1. What kind of king is Ahasuerus?
 - b. What does the deposing of Vashti tell us about the kingdom Esther is about to enter?
- 3.
 - a. In 2:5 to 7, we meet Mordecai and Esther. What do we learn about their family?
 - b. What was the situation Esther would have been swept into when the king's men came (2:8)? How much choice would she have had?

For Thought and Discussion: Christians sometimes hold Esther up as a model of moral courage from the beginning. But early in the book she hides her ethnicity, obeys Mordecai's instruction to do so (2:10, 20), and lives quietly in a pagan palace. What does this tell us about how God can work through women whose faith does not start strong?

- 4. Read 2:21 to 23. What does Mordecai do? Why might the author take the time to record this incident, which seems unrelated to the main plot?

Haman's plot (chapters 3 and 4)

Haman is identified in 3:1 as "the Agagite." Agag was the Amalekite king Saul failed to destroy in 1 Samuel 15. Mordecai is from the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as Saul (2:5). Centuries after Saul's partial obedience, the battle is still being fought. The book of Esther quietly shows us that God's purposes do not fail, even when His people fail. He preserves His own people through a young woman and her cousin to bring His plan, eventually, to Christ.

- 5.
 - a. Read chapter 3. What sets off Haman's rage?
 - b. How does Haman propose to punish a single man's offense (3:6)?

- c. What does this tell us about the kind of evil the book is up against?
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- 6.
 - a. Read 4:1 to 8. How do Mordecai, the Jews, and the city respond when the decree goes out?
 - b. Notice what is missing from this national crisis: any explicit mention of prayer or of God by name. What do you think the author wants us to feel here?
 - 7.
 - a. Read 4:9 to 17, the famous confrontation between Mordecai and Esther. What is Esther's first response?
 - b. What is Mordecai's reply (4:13 to 14)? What does he assume about God's sovereignty even while never using the word God?
 - c. What does Esther finally decide (4:15 to 16)? What is the gravity of her decision?

Optional Application: "If I perish, I perish." Most of us are not facing literal death. But many of us are facing the death of comfort, reputation, approval, or security if we step out in obedience. Where, specifically, is God inviting you to that kind of risk right now?

Two banquets (chapters 5 to 7)

- 8.
 - a. Read 5:1 to 8. What does Esther do, and what does she choose not to do?
 - b. Why might she have delayed by inviting the king to a banquet, and then a second banquet, rather than making her petition immediately?
- 9.
 - a. Read chapter 6, one of the great hinge moments in the Bible. What does the king fail to do in 6:1? Why does this matter?
 - b. What "coincidences" pile up in chapter 6? List as many as you can.

- c. If God is never named in the book, where do you see His hand most obviously in chapter 6?

The doctrine of providence

Providence is the Bible's way of describing how God governs all things, large and small, to accomplish His purposes without overriding the choices of His creatures. Providence is not magic, and it is not coincidence. It is the steady, wise, unseen hand of God working through ordinary circumstances. In the book of Esther, providence is everywhere: a queen's defiance opens a door; a Jewish girl is raised by a cousin who happens to live in Susa; a man's insomnia leads him to read a particular page of his royal records on a particular night; a death sentence is reversed by a single word from a queen who came to the throne for such a time as this. Christians today live in the same kind of story.

Study Skill, Recognizing the Doctrine of Providence: Several Scriptures teach the doctrine of providence directly. Proverbs 16:33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the LORD." Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the LORD; he turns it wherever he will." Romans 8:28 says that for those who love God, "all things work together for good." When you study a narrative passage, watch for providence at work: the seemingly small events that, looking back, you realize were God's quiet shaping of the larger story. Then ask the same question of your own life.

- 10.
 - a. Read chapter 7. How does Esther finally make her plea?
 - b. What is the king's response, and what becomes of Haman?

Deliverance and Purim (chapters 8 to 10)

- 11.
 - a. Read 8:1 to 17. What does the king grant?
 - b. Notice 8:17: "And many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for fear of the Jews had fallen on them." What does this tell us about how God's deliverance of His people affects the watching world?

12. Read 9:20 to 32. Mordecai institutes the feast of Purim, still celebrated by Jews today, more than 2,400 years later. Why is remembering important?

Under the new covenant, the Lord has given His church one weekly memorial of His mighty acts: the Lord's Supper, observed on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:23 to 26). On the same day, the church also remembers and proclaims Christ's resurrection (Acts 20:7) and lays by in store as God has prospered (1 Corinthians 16:2). These are the rhythms of remembrance God has built into the Christian life. They are simple, but they are not optional. Faith is helped enormously by the regular, weekly habit of remembering what God has done.

The hidden God

13. a. The book of Esther never names God, but every page assumes Him. Why do you think the Holy Spirit gave us a Bible book like this?
- b. Most of our lives are lived in the same kind of book. God is rarely seen but everywhere acting. How does Esther help us live well in a world like that?
14. a. Mordecai's words in 4:14 ("who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?") have become one of the most quoted lines in Scripture. What does the verse mean in context?
- b. What does it mean for you? Where has God placed you that you would not have chosen, but where He may have appointed you?

Optional Application: Make a short list of the positions, relationships, and responsibilities you currently hold. (Daughter, mother, wife, employee, neighbor, member of the Lord's church, citizen, etc.) Beside each, ask, "Why might God have put me here? What is the kingdom purpose I might be missing?" Pick the one that stirs you most and ask the Lord for the courage of Esther in it.

Your response

15. Esther teaches us that ordinary women, in compromised places, with imperfect faith, can be used by God to deliver others. Where do you suspect God is asking you to step forward, even at personal cost?

16.
 - a. Esther also teaches us that God is at work behind every coincidence, every delay, every "random" sleepless night. Where in your own story do you see the providence of God most clearly in hindsight?
 - b. How might that recognition change the way you walk through the uncertain places of your life this week?
17. Write one sentence summarizing what you most want to take away from Esther's story, and one concrete step you will take in light of it this week.

For the group

Warm-up. Begin by asking each woman to share a "coincidence" in her own life that, looking back, she now believes was the hand of God.

Discussion. Esther is a long book and the discussion could go many directions. Stay anchored on a few questions. Pay particular attention to questions 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).

Wrap-up. Close by reading Romans 8:28 to 39 aloud over your group and thanking God that He is at work even in the chapters of our lives where His name seems unmentioned. Pray that each woman would have Esther's courage to step into the kingdom assignment God has placed in her path.