

Esther: The Faithfulness of an Unseen God

Some stories are so compelling and powerful that they deserve to be told over and over again. The book of Esther represents one such story. It was written as a means to help shape the corporate identity of the Jewish people several thousand years ago, written to remind the people of God living in a broken and hostile world that their God would be faithful to deliver them.

But as we come to Esther all these centuries later, we recognize that it is a challenging book for us to engage and apply in some ways. It wasn't written to serve primarily as a moral how-to book. It doesn't possess the same sense of gospel-shaped exhortation that we might find in a New Testament epistle, nor does it offer the multi-faceted view of the Kingdom of God as do the Gospels. It is not Wisdom Literature, nor is it a prophetic book filled with apocalyptic images and warnings for God's people. It does not even offer the same exemplary lives to emulate as did Ruth's narrative. It's devoid of the name of God, devoid of any explicit mention of God, and it shares a murky and messy picture of what it means to live as an exile in a world that can be hostile toward God and his people. So one of the questions we have to wrestle with as we read through it is, *how am I to understand truth in this story and apply it to my life?*

It's a story that was written, and then read, with the purpose of growing God's peoples' collective confidence in his faithful deliverance. The questions that the Jewish people were asking while exiled in Persia are identity questions that we still ask today. *Who are we?* We are God's chosen sons and daughters, not by our merit but by the grace of God. We are exiles surrounded by a world that is, at times, hostile. Yet we are confident in the deliverance of our God. *Why are we confident in that?* Because that's who our God is. He is a deliverer, and we see that time and time again throughout the pages of Scripture. He accomplished that very thing when he led his people out of Egypt, he sustained them during exile, and he will continue to make good on his covenant promises, even when our focus drifts and our worship grows stagnant.

Esther's story is Israel's story, and it is our story insofar as it is a story about *our God*. It's a story of grace that we would do well to rehearse just as the Jews have done throughout the centuries since it was recorded several thousand years ago. This Reading Guide will hopefully serve to bring together two core values that we hold at Summit. First, we hope to cultivate your passionate pursuit of God as you engage the full scope of this story in Scripture. We plan to look across the vast expanse of biblical history and survey the story of God and his people. How did God's people become God's people? What was the covenant? How did God lead them in the exodus and

establish a kingdom? What led them to exile and how did God preserve them therein? And where, ultimately, is this story leading us?

This leads us, then, to the second core value we hope to prioritize with this Reading Guide. We want to know intimately and share freely our grace stories. Just as we said that this story is our story insofar as it is about our God, we hope that Esther's story encourages all of us to recognize the grace and deliverance of God in our lives, individually and collectively, and celebrate the Lord's faithfulness as we consider how the story of Esther and the whole story of Scripture intersect with our own stories of grace. Just as Esther was intended to be shared so that God might be praised and the peoples' hearts encouraged with each telling, so too are our stories of grace intended to be shared with others. May we be faithful to reflect, to celebrate, and to share the goodness of God in our lives.

But why *this* Reading Guide?

It is our hope that this Reading Guide will foster growth with regard to your passionate pursuit of the Lord by encouraging you to engage both the text of Esther and the broader story of redemption in Scripture. Additionally, we hope to cultivate your awareness of, and ability to articulate, the story of God's grace in your life. We hope to accomplish that with this structure each week.

- 1) Brief recap and overview of the story of Esther thus far.
- 2) Text of the corresponding passage in Esther.
- 3) Life group discussion questions that rise from the relevant passage in Esther.
- 4) Overview of the biblical story of redemption and corresponding passage(s).
- 5) Invitation to consider and share elements of our own stories of grace.

We trust that the Lord will meet you as you meditate on his Word each week. We are praying that this Guide will support you along the way, and we hope that you would find great encouragement as you journey through Esther with community, both in your life group and with our church family as a whole. We are grateful to be with you as we, through the lens of Esther's story, glimpse the faithful deliverance of our God.

Esther 1

Overview

Why is the author telling us all of this? It feels a bit like a friend who tells you a story and you find yourself wondering, after a long introduction, where all of this is going. God isn't in this story, seemingly. God's people aren't. What gives? Esther's story is set in a pagan empire ruled by an egotistical tyrant. King Ahasuerus, or Xerxes I as history knows him, takes center stage initially, throwing a party for half a year characterized by nothing less than widespread inebriation and grand displays of wealth and hubris. It is a spectacle marked by much that epitomizes the term *worldly*, and our world today. Chapter 1 feels a bit like a prologue. It isn't the primary action, but it sets us on the course of understanding the world into which we're being invited with Esther and Mordecai. Who is this king to whom Esther will ultimately bind herself? How does Esther end up in the palace anyway? What is this world that surrounds the Jewish people in Persia? This first chapter helps to answer those questions. It also serves to introduce other questions, such as, *where are God and his people in this story?*

Esther 1:1-22

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.

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.

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.

Life Group Questions

- 1)** Describe the setting for this opening scene. How does the author describe Susa, King Ahasuerus, and Persian culture more broadly? What might be the significance of these specific descriptions?
- 2)** As we focus a bit more intentionally on the author's description of the King, how would you characterize King Ahasuerus? What words come to mind as you read about his actions in Esther 1?
- 3)** What are some possible reasons why Vashti may have refused to obey the King's command? How would you say that the author characterizes her in Esther 1?
- 4)** In what ways do the culture, power structures, and relationships described in Esther 1 reflect the world in which we live today?

5) One of the author's goals in the first chapter is to make clear that God's exiled people are living in a broken world amongst a broken people. How does the author seek to accomplish this in Esther 1?

6) Read Psalm 2. How do you think this psalmist might respond to the perceived power and grandeur that we read about in Esther 1? How does the power of Ahasuerus compare to the power of the Lord as described in this psalm (and elsewhere in Scripture)?

Biblical Story of Redemption

We will ultimately spend time in this section inviting you to trace the storyline of God's redemption of his people throughout the Bible. Our hope is that in doing so we'll better grasp the profound significance of the deliverance of God in Esther not simply as an incredible story that happened to the Jews in exile some 2,500 years ago, but also because it provides us a view of our God who, at every step along the way, has proven faithful to his people. Before we trace that storyline, however, we want to begin by acknowledging that this story begins with God's people exiled in Persia, and a natural question would be to ask, *How did the Jews arrive in Persia? Why are they here?* To answer those questions we would invite you to read the following passages this week, in addition to time spent meditating on Esther 1.

- **Deuteronomy 28** | Here we see a graphic picture of the blessings and curses related to Israel's faithfulness to their covenant with the Lord. Note the language of promised exile for disobedience.
- **2 Chronicles 36** | This is a brief account of the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians. The Babylonians would ultimately be conquered by the Persians, which is how we have a remnant of the Jewish people living in the Persian capital of Susa.

Your Grace Story

This section will, throughout our study of Esther, provide a question or two intended to prompt you to consider your own grace story and seek to share God's faithfulness in your life with others. This is, in many ways, in conjunction with the activity of recounting God's deliverance as we see it (veiled though God's activity is) in Esther. To begin this first week, write down the specific details of how you came to faith in Christ. Who shared the gospel with you? What Scripture did the Lord use to draw you to himself? How did your life change when you trusted Christ?