

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?

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 biblical story of redemption and corresponding passage.
- 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 2

Overview

There is a heaviness to these first two chapters of Esther's story. We were initially invited into the very heart of Persia, the global superpower in the 5th Century BC and a kingdom shaped by the near-total but tyrannical powers of a proud king. Through the author's description of the party and the conflict between Ahasuerus and Vashti, and the subsequent machinations of the king's advisors, it was made clear that underneath the glittering facade, this was a world and a people who were deeply broken by sin. And now, in Esther 2, we see a new depth to the brokenness of this world. We are not meant to be comfortable with the descriptions of the events in this chapter. The contest to find a new queen, the stomach-turning portrayal of the king's perspective on women, all of it is presented in order to immerse us fully in this story so that we cannot help but ask, *God, where are you and what are you doing in this?* As we look closely, then, at these events in chapter 2, through the fog of sin we can begin to see that by Esther's placement on the throne and Mordecai's elevation in the kingdom, perhaps God is not inert. Perhaps He is doing more than we can, on the surface, perceive.

Esther 2:1-23

1 After these things, when the anger of King Ahasuerus had abated, he remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her. 2 Then the king's young men who attended him said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought out for the king. 3 And let the king appoint officers in all the provinces of his kingdom to gather all the beautiful young virgins to the harem in Susa the citadel, under custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who is in charge of the women. Let their cosmetics be given them. 4 And let the young woman who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so.

5 Now there was a Jew in Susa the citadel whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, 6 who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away. 7 He was bringing up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother. The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at, and when her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her as his own daughter. 8 So when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in Susa the citadel in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women. 9 And the young woman pleased him and won his favor. And he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and her portion of food, and with seven chosen young women from the king's palace, and advanced her and her young women to the best place in the harem. 10 Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known. 11 And every day Mordecai walked in front of the court of the harem to learn how Esther was and what was happening to her.

12 Now when the turn came for each young woman to go in to King Ahasuerus, after being twelve months under the regulations for the women, since this was the regular period of their beautifying, six months with oil of myrrh and six months with spices and ointments for women — **13** when the young woman went in to the king in this way, she was given whatever she desired to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. **14** In the evening she would go in, and in the morning she would return to the second harem in custody of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the concubines. She would not go in to the king again, unless the king delighted in her and she was summoned by name.

15 When the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his own daughter, to go in to the king, she asked for nothing except what Hegai the king's eunuch, who had charge of the women, advised. Now Esther was winning favor in the eyes of all who saw her. **16** And when Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, into his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign, **17** the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she won grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti. **18** Then the king gave a great feast for all his officials and servants; it was Esther's feast. He also granted a remission of taxes to the provinces and gave gifts with royal generosity.

19 Now when the virgins were gathered together the second time, Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate. **20** Esther had not made known her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had commanded her, for Esther obeyed Mordecai just as when she was brought up by him. **21** In those days, as Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, who guarded the threshold, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus. **22** And this came to the knowledge of Mordecai, and he told it to Queen Esther, and Esther told the king in the name of Mordecai. **23** When the affair was investigated and found to be so, the men were both hanged on the gallows. And it was recorded in the book of the chronicles in the presence of the king.

Life Group Questions

- 1) This is a difficult chapter to read in so many ways. Consider and discuss your response to the events described in Esther 2. In what ways was it particularly challenging for you? Why?
- 2) In what ways does the author's description of the contest, and the other events in this chapter, contribute to our understanding of the broken world in which Esther lives? How does this description reflect our own world?
- 3) Esther is the only character who is introduced with two names, including her Hebrew name (Hadassah) and her Persian name (Esther). In a story in which nothing is accidental or mere coincidence, why might this detail be significant? What does it possibly say about Esther's role in this story?
- 4) There is intentional moral ambiguity with regard to Mordecai's and Esther's actions here. The author does not comment on the rightness or wrongness of Esther's participation in the contest or Mordecai's instruction that she hide her Jewish identity. What questions does this ambiguity cause you to ask?
- 5) Where might we see God at work in Esther 1-2?
- 6) Read **Romans 8:28-30**. How might these verses serve to encourage us, especially when we find ourselves in seasons seemingly like that described in Esther 1-2, where God seems hidden and life feels difficult?

Biblical Story of Redemption

Last week we invited you, as you spent time in Scripture, to consider how it is that we got *here* with Esther, to the point in history at which God's people find themselves exiled in Persia. We looked together at Deuteronomy 28 and 2 Chronicles 36 as we pondered the covenant blessings and curses, as well as the account of the fall of Jerusalem. This week, we'd like to zoom back a bit, widen the lens even further, and ask that same question from a much broader perspective. If this story of Esther is intended, at least in part, to help shape the corporate identity of the people of God by helping us to see what it means that God is faithful in the midst of a broken world, then we would do well to understand how it is that *we* got *here*. How did we arrive at this place where we see the brokenness of people and systems described in Esther 1-2 reflected in our own world and in the yet-to-be-finished corners of our own lives? Every story has a beginning, and that includes the story of God's activity in the world. So what is the beginning of this grand story of God's cosmic redemption?

- **Genesis 1-3** | This is the beginning of the story. As we consider our place in the world and the story of grace that God is writing in our lives, we would do well to return to these chapters. Here, we are reminded of the creativity of God, of the original goodness of his works, and of the truth that life is both from Him and for Him. And yet the seeds of rebellion against God's gracious rule in our lives were planted in a garden, ultimately producing the fruit of death. Here we are reminded that we, just like the people of God in Susa, are in need of deliverance from far more than corrupt leaders and fractured world systems. We must be delivered from our own rebellion against the Lord.

Your Grace Story

We have said throughout this week's Guide that Esther 1-2 help reveal to us the depth of the brokenness of sin that was prevalent in Esther's world, just as it is in ours. In this section last week, we invited you to consider the circumstances around your experience of becoming a Christ-follower. This week, in light of what we've discussed in the first two chapters of Esther, spend some time prayerfully meditating on the ways that the Lord has transformed your life. How has the Lord grown you in the prevailing weeks, months, and years since you trusted Christ? What people and practices has he used to accomplish this? Take time to celebrate the Lord's faithfulness in your life, and consider reaching out to thank those who have been integral to your growth as a Christ-follower.