

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 3

Overview

Every good story has a villain. Up to this point in Esther's story, we would be forgiven for thinking that perhaps King Ahasuerus was being portrayed as the primary antagonist, this egomaniacal tyrant with a penchant for flying off the handle in a drunken rage. Perhaps we might consider that one of the king's advisors who exploited his rift with Vashti for personal gain would fit that bill? But as we find out in chapter 3, none of those characters embody the evil opposing the people of God in the same manner as Haman the Agagite. When he takes his place on the stage, the music begins to grow ominous, the sky darkens a bit, and we realize that the real villain has stepped before us. And he wastes no time in proving that to be so. Haman's wounded pride leads to a scheming plot for the genocidal destruction of all the Jews in Persia. And we are left wondering, as we conclude this chapter, will the Lord deliver his people from certain destruction and overwhelming evil? Will the Lord be faithful in the face of such tremendous injustice?

Esther 3:1-15

1 After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, and advanced him and set his throne above all the officials who were with him. 2 And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage. 3 Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's command?" 4 And when they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would stand, for he had told them that he was a Jew. 5 And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. 6 But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus.

7 In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur (that is, they cast lots) before Haman day after day; and they cast it month after month till the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar. 8 Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not to the king's profit to tolerate them. 9 If it please the king, let it be decreed that they be destroyed, and I will pay 10,000 talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, that they may put it into the king's treasuries." 10 So the king took his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman the Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the enemy of the Jews. 11 And the king said to Haman, "The

money is given to you, the people also, to do with them as it seems good to you.” 12 Then the king’s scribes were summoned on the thirteenth day of the first month, and an edict, according to all that Haman commanded, was written to the king’s satraps and to the governors over all the provinces and to the officials of all the peoples, to every province in its own script and every people in its own language. It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and sealed with the king’s signet ring. 13 Letters were sent by couriers to all the king’s provinces with instruction to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods. 14 A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day. 15 The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel. And the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was thrown into confusion.

Life Group Questions

- 1) How would you characterize / describe Haman? What observations stand out in Esther 3?
- 2) In Hebrew literature, how a person is introduced often serves to set the reader’s expectations for that character. Haman is referred to as an *Agagite*. Read 1 Samuel 15 and discuss why Haman may be introduced as such. What expectations / assumptions does this introduction establish?
- 3) How does Haman pitch his genocidal idea to King Ahasuerus? Why do you think Haman’s arguments were persuasive for the king?
- 4) Describe the evil and injustice as described in the events of Esther 3. Consider 1 Peter 5:6-11. How might these two passages shape our understanding of evil in the world today?
- 5) What questions does this chapter elicit in your mind? What questions may these events have raised for the Jews in Susa during Esther’s day?
- 6) Jeremiah 12:1 says, *“Righteous are you, O Lord, when I complain to you; yet, I would plead my case before you. Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all who are treacherous thrive?”* In a world where we might honestly echo that question, where can, and should, we look for hope? How can we remind ourselves of biblical hope regularly, especially in the face of evil in the world?

Biblical Story of Redemption

From the creative heart of God came life as we know it, this perfect, ordered universe displaying the glory and grandeur of the Lord. At the center of that story of creation was a garden in which God placed the apex of his creation, man and woman, to flourish and cultivate and reflect his image like nothing else he had created. Yet, as we read in the first chapters of Genesis last week, sin entered through the deception of the serpent and spread like a gangrenous infection, rending the relational fabric between God and humanity. When we speak of redemption and restoration, then, we must recognize that this has characterized the story of God and his people from the beginning. We have been, as we are, a people in need of rescue. We see that on full display in the story of the exodus. God's people are in exile and in need of deliverance, just as was true of the Jews in Persia during Esther's life, just as is true for us today.

- **Exodus 1-4; 6; 12** | The story of the exodus prefigures God's deliverance of his people that will trace through the whole of the story of Scripture. Just as it does when we meditate on the story of the exodus, and Passover, around the Easter season each year, so too did this story serve as a source of hope in darkness for Jewish men and women in Esther's day. This account speaks of the character of God, *the Deliverer*. It offers a reminder of the promise that God would stand on the side of his people, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds against a tremendously powerful enemy.

Your Grace Story

We have experienced the faithful deliverance of the Lord in our lives, just as the people of Israel did in the exodus. That is certainly true as it relates to our salvation, but it is also true as we consider our growth in Christ and the many ways that the Lord has proven faithful to heal our wounds and change our hearts. Take some time to reflect on the ways that the Lord has served as *the Deliverer* in your life. Write those stories of God's grace down or share them with someone else. Are there areas of your life that you would acknowledge the Lord desires to transform but you have, for some reason, been unwilling to allow change to happen? Would you confess that to the Lord and a faithful brother and/or sister in Christ, moving in faithful obedience toward a life of greater integrity and holiness?