

## 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 4

### Overview

Esther is eminently relatable in chapter 4. In the face of wanton evil, she is fearful for her life, fearful that she might have to abandon the comfort that she has come to know, and grieved by the prospect that her people will suffer at Haman's hand. Yet she bears an internal conflict. She must determine whether she will be a queen who happens to be a Jew, trying to ride out the coming pogrom in blissful anonymity behind the palace walls, or a Jew who has been made queen for this purpose, the rescue of her people. We know that Esther has not lived a perfectly faithful, Torah-obedient life. Her presence in the palace is proof of that. And yet, through the faithfulness of imperfect people the Lord is constantly moving for the glory of his name and the good of his kingdom. While we may wish to see the Lord's deliverance in the form of fire falling from heaven, all too often we find that it happens in the tiny coincidences of our lives wherein we might, in retrospect, see that the Lord was working all along. Surrounded by the invitation to compromise in compliance with the will of the world around us, and often battling our own identity crises, we must address some of the same questions that were before Esther. When confronted with the evil present in the world, will we fall into hopeless despair, or will we remind our hearts that our God cares for his people and that his promises will stand no matter the opposition? Yes, there is unresolved tension at the end of chapter 4. We have no idea whether or not Esther's appeal to the king will be met with mercy or death. But there is hope, faint though it may be, that God is not blind or unconcerned. He is working, though his movements may be hidden by the simplicity of ordinary folks and everyday life.

### *Esther 4:1-17*

*1 When Mordecai learned all that had been done, Mordecai tore his clothes and put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the midst of the city, and he cried out with a loud and bitter cry. 2 He went up to the entrance of the king's gate, for no one was allowed to enter the king's gate clothed in sackcloth. 3 And in every province, wherever the king's command and his decree reached, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting and weeping and lamenting, and many of them lay in sackcloth and ashes. 4 When Esther's young women and her eunuchs came and told her, the queen was deeply distressed. She sent garments to clothe Mordecai, so that he might take off his sackcloth, but he would not accept them. 5 Then Esther called for Hathach, one of the king's eunuchs, who had been appointed to attend her, and ordered him to go to Mordecai to learn what this was and why it was. 6 Hathach went out to Mordecai in the open square of the city in front of the king's gate, 7 and Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact sum of money that Haman had promised to pay into the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews. 8 Mordecai also gave him a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther and explain it to her and command her to go to the king to beg his favor and plead with him on behalf of her*

people. **9** And Hathach went and told Esther what Mordecai had said. **10** Then Esther spoke to Hathach and commanded him to go to Mordecai and say, **11** “All the king’s servants and the people of the king’s provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—to be put to death, except the one to whom the king holds out the golden scepter so that he may live. But as for me, I have not been called to come in to the king these thirty days.”

**12** And they told Mordecai what Esther had said. **13** Then Mordecai told them to reply to Esther, “Do not think to yourself that in the king’s palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. **14** For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” **15** Then Esther told them to reply to Mordecai, **16** “Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my young women will also fast as you do. Then I will go to the king, though it is against the law, and if I perish, I perish.” **17** Mordecai then went away and did everything as Esther had ordered him.

### **Life Group Questions**

- 1)** What observations stand out from Esther 4? How would you describe / characterize the actions of Esther and Mordecai in this chapter?
- 2)** Put yourself in Esther’s place in this chapter. Why might she be hesitant to speak on behalf of the Jews? In what ways might she be wrestling with her own identity as a queen and as a Jewish woman?
- 3)** How does Mordecai seek to persuade Esther in 4:13-14? Why might it be significant that in this section that speaks so clearly about the deliverance of the Jewish people, the Lord is never once mentioned?
- 4)** In what ways are we left with questions and uncertainty at the end of Esther 4? How does the author invite us to hope in spite of those?
- 5)** How have you risked opposition because of your willingness to identify as a Christ-follower? What has your identity as a Christian cost you in your life (professionally, relationally, etc)?
- 6)** How does Esther’s relationship with Mordecai model the power of community for maintaining the moorings of our identity as Christians in a sometimes-hostile world? How can we encourage one another to resist the temptation to compromise our identity as Christ-followers for the sake of gain, comfort, or influence in the world?

## **Biblical Story of Redemption**

At the very heart of God's relationship with his people stands the idea of covenant. After leading Israel out of slavery in Egypt, the Lord made one such covenant with the people, through Moses the mediator, known today as the Mosaic Covenant. It is familiar for the Ten Commandments, the Lord descending on Sinai, the stone tablets broken at the sight of the golden calf, and the rules and regulations which shaped the lives of God's people. Yet, if we were to cut to the core of this covenant, we would find some themes that resonate throughout the whole story of Scripture, namely, that God in his grace redeemed his people, that he promises his faithful care for them, and that he asks in return that they worship him alone. We already saw in our Week 1 Reading Guide, looking at Deuteronomy 28, that the people's failure to live in obedience to this covenant led to their exile. But we must recognize that this covenant also serves as the foundation of hope for God's deliverance of Esther and God's people. How? Because we know from this covenant that our God has been faithful, that he has made good on his promise to deliver his people, and therein we might hope that he will prove faithful to do it again. This sits at the heart of our faith, as well. We are recipients of God's grace, brought into relationship with God by no merit of our own, and called to love and serve the Lord with our whole lives.

- **Deuteronomy 5-8** | In this retelling of the Mosaic Covenant, Moses reminds the people of what was accomplished on Sinai. He exhorts the people to faithfully remember the covenant promises, both for their own sake and for the sake of subsequent generations. Note in these verses not simply a demand for obedience, but also the reminders of the grace of God.

## **Your Grace Story**

The gospel is "good news" not simply because of the message it contains but also because of the means of transmission. It is a story of grace meant to be told. We have, these last three weeks, invited you to consider various elements of your own story and, at times, to share bits of it with others. Just as Moses, in Deuteronomy 6, speaks of the power of remembering for the sake of faith formation, would you share your testimony of God's grace in your life with a brother or sister in Christ this week? Life groups provide a great place for this to happen, as it will hopefully serve as a means of strengthening your confidence in the Lord, both as you recount your own story and hear of God's grace in the lives of others.