

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 5

Overview

If you've ever been a part of a construction project, or at least privy to the process, then you'll know that the early and middle stages can feel overwhelming. Why? Because it's difficult to look at the exposed studs and plastic-covered window openings, the sub-flooring and bare insulation, and wonder how it's possible to make, from this chaos, anything resembling the beautifully designed architectural plans that you saw at the very beginning. But there does come a point in the project when the contractor shows you around and you can, finally, begin to see how the rooms and hallways and stairs reflect the vision that was cast as to what this place would eventually become. Maybe it strains the metaphor a bit too far, but that's one way that we can think of all that takes place here in Esther 5. We have said, from the beginning, that we will see God's faithful activity behind the scenes if we're willing to look closely at Esther's story but, to be fair, we've had to squint pretty hard thus far. And there is no resolution here, just tension, brief respite, then the introduction of more tension as the story, rolling downhill, picks up pace. Esther risks her life and goes before the king with a request, but not *the request*. And we get a front row seat to Esther's transformation as she embraces her identity as a Jewish woman placed in the position of queen so that she might rescue her people. And she does so at great risk to herself, acknowledging that even her life would be a worthy payment if she might, somehow, save her kin. Conversely, like a ship infected with rust, Haman's heart is sick with pride. He believes the remedy is public praise and Mordecai's blood, but we know, because of the way that pride works, that it will simply grow and consume more of him. Esther 5 reveals two divergent paths, two distinct identities that are taking shape in Esther and Haman. Look closely and see what God is up to, the author seems to say. Let's look closely together at Esther 5 this week and see together.

Esther 5:1-14

1 On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, in front of the king's quarters, while the king was sitting on his royal throne inside the throne room opposite the entrance to the palace. 2 And when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, she won favor in his sight, and he held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther approached and touched the tip of the scepter. 3 And the king said to her, "What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom." 4 And Esther said, "If it please the king, let the king and Haman come today to a feast that I have prepared for the king." 5 Then the king said, "Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther has asked." So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. 6 And as they were drinking wine after the feast, the king said to Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my

kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." 7 Then Esther answered, "My wish and my request is: 8 If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my wish and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said."

9 And Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart. But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath against Mordecai. 10 Nevertheless, Haman restrained himself and went home, and he sent and brought his friends and his wife Zeresh. 11 And Haman recounted to them the splendor of his riches, the number of his sons, all the promotions with which the king had honored him, and how he had advanced him above the officials and the servants of the king. 12 Then Haman said, "Even Queen Esther let no one but me come with the king to the feast she prepared. And tomorrow also I am invited by her together with the king. 13 Yet all this is worth nothing to me, so long as I see Mordecai the Jew sitting at the king's gate." 14 Then his wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Let a gallows fifty cubits high be made, and in the morning tell the king to have Mordecai hanged upon it. Then go joyfully with the king to the feast." This idea pleased Haman, and he had the gallows made.

Life Group Questions

- 1) What observations stand out from Esther 5? How would you describe the differences between Esther's actions/identity and Haman's actions/identity?
- 2) In what ways is there still tension/a lack of resolution in the story up to this point? What are some of the questions that are still yet to be answered?
- 3) Describe evidences of the Lord's activity in Esther 5. As you look closely at the text, where might you see a breadcrumb leading you further down the path toward a clear picture of God's faithful, providential provision?
- 4) Haman's identity was built upon his pride and, correspondingly, his deep desire for public acclaim and affirmation. Why is pride so dangerous and corrosive in our lives? Where is pride most actively present in your heart and life?
- 5) In what ways does the gospel serve as an answer to pride? What passage(s) would you reference that speak to the pride-killing power of the gospel (i.e. Ephesians 2:1-10)?

Biblical Story of Redemption

2 Samuel 7; 1 Kings 8 | God's relationship with Israel continued to develop following the institution of the Mosaic Covenant that we read last week. Ultimately, after they were granted possession of the land of promise, they were formed into a kingdom, first led by Saul and, then, by David. Even as the form of Israel's existence was shifting, the basis of their relationship with the Lord, their purpose in the world, and their reliance on the promises of God never changed. These were God's covenant people. The two passages that we will consider this week demonstrate that well. The passage in 2 Samuel highlights David's relationship with the Lord, the Lord's continued covenant with Israel, and the promise of God's perpetual provision. The passage in 1 Kings 8 moves the story forward to the reign of Solomon, David's son, who builds and dedicates the Temple in Jerusalem and, in so doing, reiterates the distinct significance of God's covenant with his people. So as we reflect on these passages, make note of how the language of covenant and promise, in the context of the kingdom of Israel, might influence the Jews living in Susa during the time of Esther and Mordecai. What promises do you hear that might encourage their hearts? How might these passages shape their hope?

Your Grace Story

One of our life group questions above asks you to answer how the gospel addresses pride in our lives, and that's important to consider well. But we can expand that question a bit further in this section wherein we've encouraged you to think about various aspects of your grace story over the last several weeks. Esther 5, in part, helps us to see the significance of allowing our identity to be formed by the Lord and his truth rather than a cancerous worship of self. God is about the business of defining our identity and, from that, shaping the whole of our lives. Here, then, is what we would invite you to spend time meditating on this week. How does the grace of God shape our identity? What passages help frame that for you? And what impact, ultimately, does that have on the everyday business of life? If you are looking for some places to start thinking through identity formation and the gospel, consider Roman 8, Colossians 3, and 1 Peter 2.